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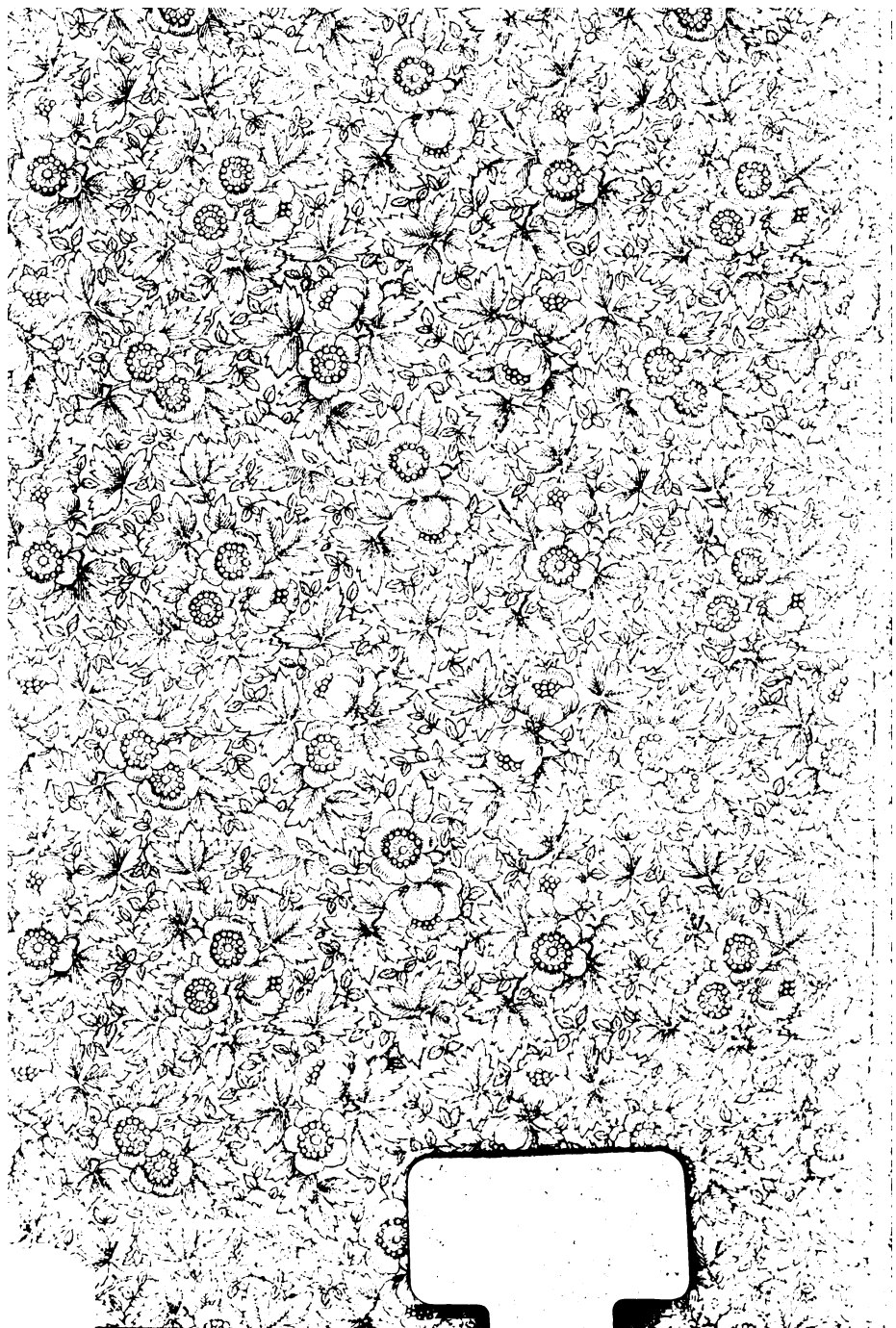
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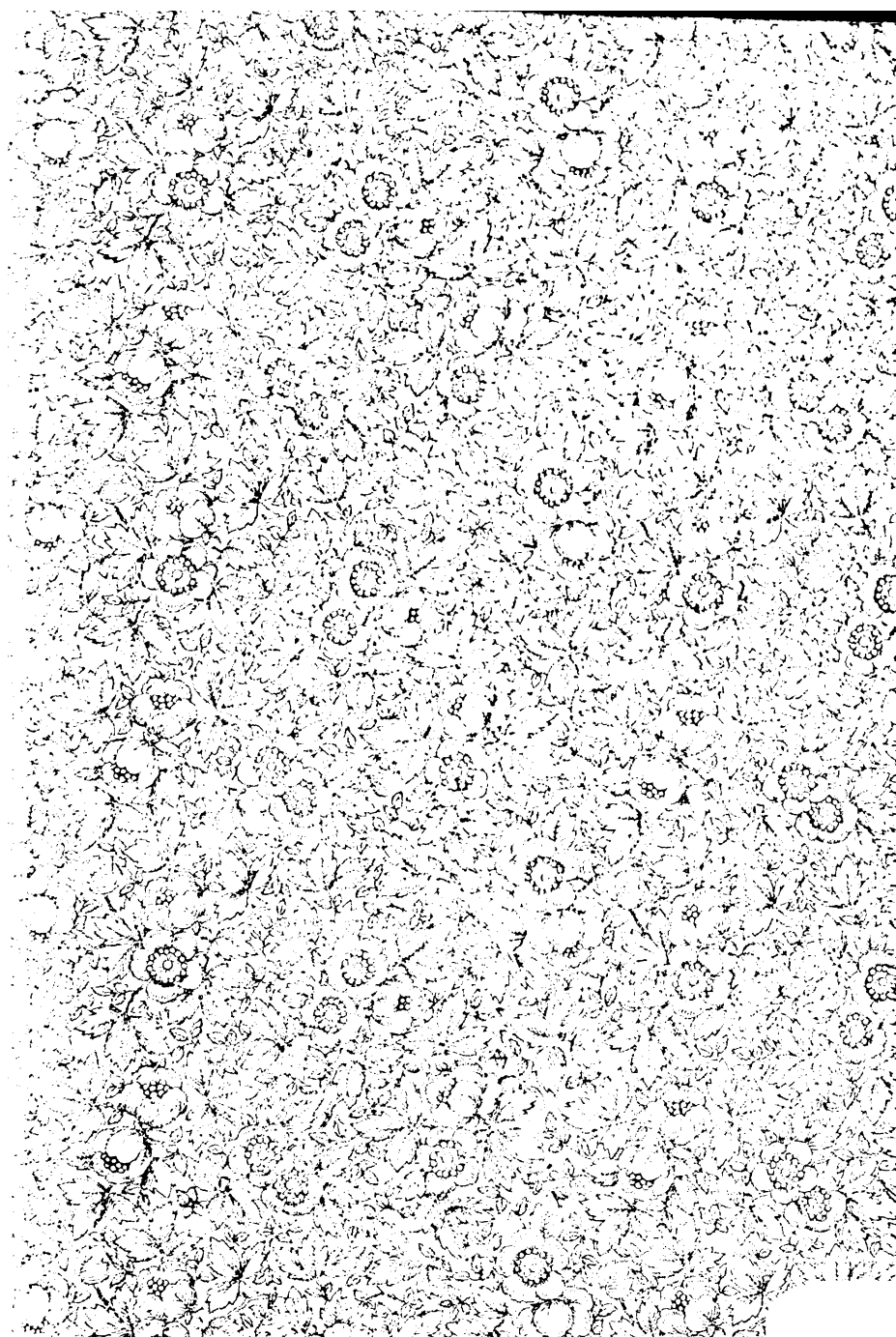
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# THREE FAIR DAUGHTERS

BY THE AUTHOR OF  
THE QUEEN OF TWO WORLDS.







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# THREE FAIR DAUGHTERS:

*A NOVEL.*

BY

LAURENCE BROOKE,

AUTHOR OF THE 'QUEEN OF TWO WORLDS,' ETC.

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*



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## *CONTENTS.*

CHAPTER I.		PAGE
MR FARQUHAR'S PROPOSAL,	. . .	I
CHAPTER II.		
A RUINED MAN,	. . . . .	31
CHAPTER III.		
MR CHUMLEIGH DECLARES HIMSELF,	. . .	47
CHAPTER IV.		
KATIE'S LOVER,	. . . . .	63
CHAPTER V.		
MR CHESTER ASSERTS HIMSELF,	. . .	84
CHAPTER VI.		
DACRE COURT,	. . . . .	104



CHAPTER VII.	
A CHARMING RELATIVE, . . . . .	PAGE 120
CHAPTER VIII.	
CONFIDENCES, . . . . .	144
CHAPTER IX.	
AN ELIGIBLE YOUNG MAN, . . . . .	161
CHAPTER X.	
AN UNCONVENTIONAL MEETING, . . . . .	174
CHAPTER XI.	
A SURPRISE, . . . . .	192
CHAPTER XII.	
CROSS-PURPOSES, . . . . .	215





# THREE FAIR DAUGHTERS.

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## CHAPTER I.

### MR FARQUHAR'S PROPOSAL.

' He either fears his fate too much,  
Or his deserts are small,  
Who dares not put it to the touch,  
And win or lose it all.'

**T**HIS is what Lieutenant Robert Farquhar, of Her Majesty's —th Lancers, was repeating softly to himself, as he walked slowly along the sands at Seaford. As he was not a young man of deep reading, nor ordinarily given to quoting poetry, it stands to reason that there must have been a peculiar signi-

fiance in his doing so on the present occasion. The fact is, Mr Farquhar was that morning bent upon an important errand—an errand, indeed, of such deep import and consequence to his future, that his heart beat fast and his pulses thrilled in anticipation as he walked along the yellow, glittering sands, on which a hot June sun was beating fiercely. He was going to make a proposal of marriage to a very charming young lady.

Such a proceeding, always more or less of a formidable nature, should have been rendered easier in his case, through the circumstance that the young lady on whom he was about to confer the honour was no recent acquaintance, but a very old friend. He had known Lenore Chester from her babyhood—had been her playmate and youthful cavalier as a boy, had led her into all sorts of scrapes, and stood by her when brought to book for them, with a chivalry that proved him to be a lad of mettle. In their youth they had perpetrated every con-

ceivable kind of iniquity, disobeyed every written and every unwritten law ordained for their guidance by their elders, with an utter disregard of consequences only possible in children blessed with abnormally high spirits and reckless daring.

It did Mr Farquhar good, and kept his courage as it were up to the sticking point, to recall the memory of some of their childish escapades—for did not these experiences of the past constitute so many links between them, and point to matrimony as a fitting termination of such close friendship? His prospects were satisfactory; he was a favourite with the Chester family; he was a healthy-looking, fresh-coloured young Englishman—the only noticeable drawback to his personal appearance being his hair, which was deeply, darkly, beautifully red. There were several young ladies in the immediate neighbourhood of Seaford who would have jumped at the chance of calling themselves ‘Mrs Robert Farquhar.’

And yet, and yet, as he struck up the

steep path that led from the sands on to the cliff, and stood by the low wall that marked the limit of Algernon Chester's grounds on this, the south side, he felt his heart growing a little chill. He knew where he would be certain to find Lenore on this lovely summer morning—in a curious kind of leafy bower that overlooked the sands, about a quarter of a mile higher up than where he was standing. A leap over the wall—an easy feat to one so well skilled in athletic pastimes—and the walk of a few minutes over the soft, springy turf would bring him into her presence.

Easy enough to get to her, but how and what would be the manner of his return? Would it be Yes or No? All he knew with any certainty was this—that he loved her, and must have loved her all his life, although perhaps the knowledge of how necessary she was to him had not always been patent to him, but had come upon him all in a flash, as it were—had dawned upon him more par-

ticularly as late as six months ago, on a certain night when Lenore Chester had bewitched all eyes and turned all hearts at a county ball.

As they had floated along together to the dreamy waltz music, it had then and there struck him that something tenderer and deeper than the old brotherly feeling was stirring in his heart ; that his pride in her bright young beauty was the pride of a lover, not of a friend. And when he watched her dancing with other men, and noted how plainly their faces expressed their admiration, he felt that the impulse which prompted him to devote them one and all to the infernal gods, for daring to look their admiration so plainly, could only be born of that bitter accompaniment of true love—*jealousy*. Then and there would he have spoken, have put his fate 'to the touch,' but he could find no opportunity.

The morning which succeeded to that eventful night had brought more sober

reflections. The clear searching light of morning has a trick of dispelling the roseate illusions of hot-headed youth. In their childish days they had kissed, and quarrelled, and loved each other after the fashion of tender innocents united by the ties of constant companionship and the thrilling memories of daring escapades which had brought a swift and common punishment in their train. But what had been her treatment of him since they had passed over the border-land dividing a child from a grown-up young maiden who has to stand upon her dignity, and be circumspect even in her relations with a life-long friend? Had it been such as to encourage him in the hope that she would change her name to Farquhar with anything like the alacrity he desired?

This was the question that the gallant young officer put to himself next morning, and it was one to which his conscience could not return a decided answer. What were the signs which went to prove that a

girl was in love? The standard authorities on such subjects are the poets and the novelists. Mr Farquhar recalled all the stray pieces of prose and poetry which a not very profound acquaintance with literature had left on his memory, and found that tremors, blushes, shy smiles, and still shyer glances were the usual symptoms of the tender passion in the case of the female patient. And when he had thoroughly satisfied himself on this point, he heaved a gentle sigh of disappointment. For he had observed none of these symptoms in Lenore's intercourse with himself.

He never remembered to have seen her cheek flush like the dawning of the day at his approach; while her frank blue eyes had ever been lifted to his with the boldness of a young lady who had grown to regard him as a brother. Such a want of embarrassment, if what the poets and novelists said was true, was not encouraging to his hopes. And the end of these



profound cogitations was that Mr Farquhar returned to his military duties without the fateful words having been spoken which were to elicit from his beloved an answer that should make him either the happiest or most miserable of men.

He returned to those choice spirits, his comrades in the —th Lancers, but the airy vision of Lenore Chester pursued him. That too, maddening beauty haunted his thoughts by day, his dreams by night, till it set his inflammable heart on fire. He was not more romantic than the majority of healthy-minded young Englishmen, but he began to understand what the poets meant when they wrote such verses, for instance, as the following :—

‘ I see her in the dewy flowers,  
I see her sweet and fair ;  
I hear her in the tunefu’ birds,  
I hear her charm the air.  
There’s not a bonnie flower that springs  
By fountain, shaw, or green—  
There’s not a bonnie bird that sings,  
But minds me o’ my Jean.’

Talk about flowers and birds, indeed, reminding a man of his beloved ! Why, in his present idiotic condition of mind, there was hardly a thing belonging to the organic or inorganic world that did not, by a subtle association of ideas, blend itself with the thought of Lenore. Metaphorically speaking, he breakfasted, lunched, dined, and supped off the image of his too fascinating playmate. There was one delirious occasion on which, after having smoked half-a-dozen cigars and quaffed unlimited tumblers of brandy and seltzer in the genial companionship of that grizzled veteran, Major Dewsnap, his excited fancy had converted the bottle proboscis and red face of the not too handsome officer into the spiritual countenance and the 'maddening, ineffable nose' of his absent sweetheart. It was only when the hoarse voice of his comrade, proposing one more weed before they separated, broke the charm, that he was aware of the honour which had been conferred on the unconscious major.

For six long, agonising months he wrestled and fought manfully with his passion, tried every remedy that was known in his simple pharmacopœia. Cigars did not cure him, neither did brandy and seltzer. Neither did flirtation, although he gave it a fair trial; neither did the congenial society of the bottle-nosed Dewsnap, although he was an officer whose humorous conversation and witty sallies would have tempted the melancholy Jaques himself to convivial thoughts.

Then there came the time when he felt he could wait no longer, unless he was prepared to end his days in a lunatic asylum. He would go at once to Deepdale and learn his fate. If she said 'Yes,' all Paradise would open to his gaze. If she said 'No'—he would bear it like a man. He could bear refusal, but he could not, and he would not, bear this horrible uncertainty. As the result of this determination, behold

him, on this morning in the 'leafy month of June,' wending his way to his charmer, and fortifying himself by the quotation of those verses prefixed to the head of this chapter.

For a moment he paused, with his hand on the low wall by the side of which we left him when beginning this explanatory digression. Should he put it off till to-morrow? Even the horrible uncertainty of another day *might* be better than the certainty which another ten minutes would bring forth—if she were to say No. Then he reproached himself with being a coward, and springing lightly over the wall, walked towards the bower in which he had sat with her a hundred times—his heart beating faster, his pulse going quicker, than they would have done if he had been marching up to the mouth of the enemy's cannon.

Blissfully unconscious of what the Fates had in store for her, Lenore Chester was

leaning over the wall which Farquhar had just scaled lower down. A sharp bend of the cliff on her left prevented her following the track of the sands from this point, or she would have been able to see him walking along, and in such a case would have undoubtedly waved him a friendly signal.

It was early in June. The warm breath of summer had clothed the fields and trees with beauty. The golden sunlight illuminated the glistening sands and silver sea. White-winged craft glided lazily along on the bosom of the placid waters. In the dreamy silence you could hear the countless murmurs of human and insect life, as they seemed to ebb and flow with the rhythmical cadence of the lapping waves. Over all brooded the slumberous languor of a hazy summer's morning, and the sleepy peace so dear to the wearied heart and tired brain—still more dear, more exquisitely dear, to lovers.

Of all the fair things around her, she

was not the least fair. There are various kinds of beauty, as of every other goodly gift. There is a kind of beauty which has never cost a man a serious heartache, and never will. The features are faultless, the outline perfect. But they are cold, statuesque ; they lack animation, warmth, and colour. They resemble Pygmalion's statue ere the gods heard the artist's prayer and breathed the quickening breath of life into the soulless marble.

On the other hand, there is a certain sort of beauty which, seen for only a few brief hours, for even a few brief minutes, in a ballroom, on a tennis lawn, sinks into the gazer's soul and abides with him like the memory of some exquisite melody. Lenore Chester's beauty was of this latter and—regarding it from Robert Farquhar's point of view—more dangerous kind.

As she stood there, gazing dreamily on the sea, she looked the incarnation of bright and joyous girlhood. The lustrous light of youth shone in her sweet, blue

eyes. The warm flush of youth glowed upon her smooth, delicately-rounded cheek. The frank, sunny smile of youth was upon her full, red lips. She stood upon the threshold of womanhood, and as yet there had fallen upon it no dark and baneful shadow of sorrow, there had descended upon it no evil blight. Up to the present she had sailed along on the calm ocean of content and peace, ignorant of the rocks and shoals, the storms and tempests, that lie in waiting for the majority of Life's mariners.

What was she thinking of as she gazed so steadfastly on that smooth, unruffled sea? What do most young women of her age (eighteen) think of when they think at all?—of their last night's partners, of their new dresses, of a thousand and one things that are of interest to none but themselves. So absorbed was she, however, that she failed to hear the crumpling of the grass behind her, and not until her name was uttered by a well-known voice was she

aware of the fact that she was no longer alone.

‘“Are you that rare and radiant maiden whom the angels call Lenore?”’ quoted the new-comer, advancing to her with outstretched hand. In the bird-nesting, and tree-climbing, and haymaking days they had been used to kiss with great zest and frequency, but of course all that had been dropped long ago. Of late years the only chance of such a familiarity had been afforded once a-year by the friendly misletoe.

‘I believe so,’ she answered, with a readiness and ease that told of long acquaintance.

Farquhar was, as I have previously stated, a fresh, healthy-looking young Englishman—but he could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be called handsome. He had that brilliant complexion which so often accompanies red hair, and even, white teeth. But his nose had too celestial a tendency, and his mouth was



too large for beauty. Some people considered him plain ; but he was such a good-natured creature, and his manners were so affable, and there was such an undeniable look of honesty in the expression of his frank, open face, even in the sturdy set of his stalwart, broad-chested figure—such a hearty ring in his voice, that there were very few who did not warm to Robert Farquhar in the first five minutes of their acquaintance with him.

After they had shaken hands, he took up his position beside Lenore, and gazed in a seaward direction with an intensity that would have led you to suppose he was in the coast-guard service, and on the look-out for an invisible smuggler. As a matter of fact, he would not have known a smuggler if he had seen one. The silence presently grew so oppressive that he felt constrained to break it with the following original remark,—

‘ What a lovely day, isn’t it ? ’

Lenore smiled at the singular brilliancy

of this tardy observation. And yet it was not often that Bob Farquhar suffered from not having anything to say. His cardinal fault was a tendency to talk too much.

‘I am glad you have spoken at last. Do you know, Bob, your long silence reminded me of a story that I heard the other day.’

‘Indeed ! I should like to hear the story,’ said Mr Farquhar, with a trace of his old vivacity.

‘Oh, it’s nothing much. A man wanted his sweetheart to come away from where the band was playing, because he couldn’t hear himself speak for the noise. So they went and sat down in some sequestered spot, and it was half-an-hour before the man opened his lips again.’

‘Ha, ha !’ laughed Mr Farquhar rather confusedly. ‘He was a very brilliant fellow that, certainly And I put you in mind of him, did I ? Well, the fact is, Lenore, I have something of great weight on my mind. And mine is not the sort of

mind that feels comfortable under an unusual burden.'

'I can quite believe that,' she said softly. 'Pray, Bob, have a care. Think how your friends and the world would suffer if you were to overtax that magnificent brain of yours.'

She had spoken in her usual merry, jesting way when in his society, he being perfectly accustomed to such light badinage at her hands. But as she looked at him, an indefinable something in his expression caused her to tremble inwardly with a sudden and terrible fear. Could it be possible that Bob Farquhar, with whom she had played as a child, teased as a girl, whom she had grown to look upon as a brother,—could it be possible that this young man was about to make an idiot of himself by—

Before the idea was well defined in her own mind, Farquhar had plunged *in medias res* with a reckless audacity that surprised even herself.

‘Lenore, I have been thinking how happy we could be together for the rest of our lives. I love, I adore you. I have done so from the days when we were boy and girl together, when we used to go bird-nesting, and climbing trees, and—and making ourselves generally a couple of dirty and ill-conditioned little objects. And now it has come to a climax; I must know my fate. I’ve been wanting to get this out for the last six months, and haven’t had the pluck. *Now*, thank Heaven, it is out.’ From the fervour with which he gave utterance to this last sentence, one would have supposed he was referring rather to the extraction of a tough double tooth than to a proposal of marriage made to a charming young lady. ‘Don’t keep me in suspense, there’s a darling,’ he cried impetuously. ‘Remember I’ve been keeping it in for the last six months.’

Lenore blushed; of that there was not the slightest doubt. But the blush was one of surprise, of embarrassment, of any-

thing save that sweet confusion characteristic of a willing listener. So much even Mr Farquhar—unskilled as he was in the ways of women, but enlightened by his diligent perusal of amatory literature—surmised.

‘Don’t you care for me the least bit in the world?’ he asked falteringly.

This was the answer that Lenore gave him :—

‘I wish you had kept it in for another six months, Robert.’

‘Why?’ he demanded, thoroughly taken aback by this strange aspiration.

‘Because in that time you might have grown wiser, and made up your mind to keep it in altogether.’

Her words seemed brusque, but her tones trembled slightly with genuine pity for her former playmate.

‘Don’t chaff, Lenore; I’m as serious as a judge,’ he said very earnestly.

‘So am I — as serious as a benchful of judges.’ She went up to him and laid

her hand kindly on his shoulder. 'Oh, Bob, I'm so sorry for this. I don't care for you in that way, in the least. I have always looked upon you as a brother.'

Mr Farquhar emitted a hollow groan of dissatisfaction.

'You are too flattering,' he said, with a faint attempt at satire that did not harmonise with his forlorn and woe-begone appearance.

She was silent under this scathing sarcasm. It being her first experience in the matter of offers of marriage, she did not know how to argue with a discomfited suitor. After a little while Mr Farquhar dropped the scornful for the pathetic.

'I shall never get over it, Lenore. You have been my idol, the dream of my life. I haven't a hope left; I don't care what becomes of me. I should be glad if there was war soon, or if we could be sent to the Gold Coast, or some jolly,

unhealthy place that is warranted to polish a fellow off in a few months.'

He was developing a reckless mood. If he cultivated this sort of ideas, she felt she would be bound to marry him in order to save him from an early grave.

'Let me tell you a little story, Bob,' she said in a soothing tone. 'I know a story that is exactly suited to your present condition.'

'If it isn't more complimentary than the other one, perhaps you will excuse my declining to listen to it,' he answered with stern politeness.

'Don't be cross, Bob. This story will be uncomplimentary to myself. There was once a young man who fell in love with a pretty girl. He proposed, and she refused him. The young man felt and talked as you do, for a time. Then some kind friend advised him to seek change of scene—'

'I quite understand the hint conveyed

in that last sentence,' interrupted Mr Farquhar witheringly.

'He took his friend's advice,' resumed Lenore sweetly. 'It was five years before he saw his old sweetheart again. She was married. And after he had met her, this is what he said,—“What *could* I have ever seen in that dowdy, insignificant creature? Thank Heaven, she said No.” That is my story, Robert Farquhar; the moral is plain—Go thou and do likewise.'

He would have liked to feel angry with her, to consider himself a deeply injured young man, to think of her as a heartless flirt, a coquette who had lured him to his undoing. But the sweet, radiant face, the lovely eyes of 'candid blue' looking straight into his own, dispelled these black, uncharitable thoughts; nay, did more, since they restored him in a great measure to his old, genial self.

'I think we might have been very



happy,' he said, with a faint sigh. 'But of course it takes two people to get married; and since you won't be one, I must grin and abide.'

'Now you're talking like the sensible young man I've always taken you for,' she cried encouragingly. 'All that melancholy rubbish about the Gold Coast didn't suit you in the least. And you know, Bob, you will soon fall in love with somebody else. There are plenty of nicer and prettier girls than I in the world,' she concluded with praiseworthy candour.

'That may be,' replied the Lieutenant with a terrible lack of gallantry that can only be accounted for on the ground of the rude shock administered so recently to his fondest hopes. 'But what is that some fellow says,—

"What care I how fair they be,  
If they be not fair for me?"

It is my misfortune, I may say my curse,'

he added solemnly, 'that I am of a constant nature.'

Lenore grew a little alarmed at this sudden relapse into sentiment. She hastened to answer him, in her brightest and most vivacious tones.

'Oh, you'll soon get over it, Bob. These sort of fancies always attack one in youth, like the measles or the scarlatina, you know. All the same; I'm awfully sorry we couldn't have kept just as we were; for I'm really very fond of you, Bob; and there's hardly anything I wouldn't do to oblige you, except marry you.'

This was the kind of salve that Miss Chester, in her ignorance and inexperience, applied to her admirer's wound. After all, the situation was an intensely embarrassing one, in spite of the fact that they had known each other from childhood.

Just as she was longing, almost desperately, for something to put an end to this unpleasant *tête-à-tête*, that something unexpectedly arrived in the person of Jones, her

mother's maid. As a rule, Jones was a most collected mortal, and gave you the impression of a person whose equanimity was not to be disturbed by trifles. On the present occasion her ordinary calm appeared to have forsaken her. Her countenance was full of agitation, and she was actually *running*. Lenore felt frightened as she witnessed this phenomenon; for she was sure that nothing short of the Deluge could have prompted Jones to use such indecent haste.

'If you please, miss, your mamma wants you directly. You are not to lose a moment,' she said breathlessly. Then, having shot out this message, turned and ran—yes, actually ran back, as fast as her age and weight would allow her.

'I'm afraid there's something the matter,' said Lenore, her face growing white. 'I haven't seen Jones in such a state of agitation for over five years, when there was a fire in the west wing. I must go, Bob,—good-bye.'

‘Good-bye,’ said Bob ruefully. ‘I shall clear out of this in a few days, and I sha’n’t see you again till I’m—”

‘Quite cured,’ cried Lenore, smiling a little. ‘Many thanks for the compliment you’ve paid me, and which I’ve appreciated so poorly. And, Bob,’ she added, with a blush, ‘don’t fancy I shall forget you because you’re away. I shall always think kindly of you. It’s my first proposal, you know; and no girl could help but think kindly of the man who made it. Good-bye, once again. Come back some day, and bring a nice wife with you, and I’ll promise to love her like a sister.’

‘Perhaps *she* won’t be so ready to take to the sisterly business,’ suggested Mr Farquhar, as he gave a last lingering pressure to her hand. ‘If she knew what a rival you had been, she certainly wouldn’t.’

‘Good-bye!’ again cried Lenore; and this time it was a real good-bye; for before her admirer could collect his wits, she had

regained possession of her hand, and was flying across the ground homewards, with all the speed of eighteen years. After he had watched her out of sight, Mr Farquhar got down on to the sands by the same private path by which he had ascended, and had an hour or two of lonely and gloomy meditation. Ultimately he lighted a cigar, the soothing fumes of which helped him to take a more cheerful view of the situation. When he reached home, he had made up his mind to renounce love for evermore, and go in for ambition. He would study his profession; he would seek glory, and expire, full of years and honours, as Field-Marshal Farquhar. He would be buried in Westminster Abbey, to the sound of 'the mourning of a mighty nation,' etc., etc.

So much for the love-born Farquhar. As for Lenore, lithe and fleet though she was, a young nineteenth-century Atalanta, it took a good many seconds for her to reach the house. Poor child, she need not

have hurried ; one learns bad news quickly enough without hastening to meet them.

She found her mother in a condition bordering on hysterics. Beside Mrs Chester was the faithful Jones, who had grown grey in her mistress's service, and was mingling her own honest tears with those of the unhappy lady. Lenore sank down on her knees, and took her mother's hands between her own in a tender, caressing fashion.

‘What is the matter, darling?’

‘Lenore,’ answered Mrs Chester with startling abruptness, ‘the matter is this—we are RUINED, RUINED. We shall have to give up Deepdale, and live in some stuffy place—in a garret, most probably. Your wicked, extravagant father has been living on capital for the last fifteen years, and has never breathed a word to me. We are paupers, my poor child—paupers.’

The girl turned white to the lips. Involuntarily her gaze turned towards the fair prospect seen through the window,

looking doubly fair in the light of this glorious summer day. A mist rose before her eyes ; a lump came into her throat. She flung her arms round her mother's neck, and cried, in a voice of passionate sorrow,—

‘ Things cannot be so bad as this. We shall never be obliged to say good-bye to Deepdale.’

Now, as Mrs Chester was somewhat given to exaggeration in her opinions and statements, it may be as well to go to other sources for information. And this I intend doing in the next chapter.





## CHAPTER II.

### A RUINED MAN.

**A**BOUT the same hour as that in which Bob Farquhar set out with the intention of offering his hand and heart to Lenore, Mr Chester, the owner of Deepdale, and—to outward appearance—a prosperous man, was seated in his library, engaged in the task of examining his annual expenditure. I apprehend there are few persons to whom the process known as ‘going through accounts’ is likely to prove an exhilarating task. Cræsus among the ancients, a Rothschild or a Duke of Westminster among the moderns, may be exceptions to the general rule.



There were special reasons why the task should be a mournful one to Algernon Chester of Deepdale. His rent-roll was a little over three thousand per annum. For the last ten years he had lived at the rate of six thousand. The difference between the two amounts for the time gives a result of thirty thousand pounds, exclusive of interest. At the present moment the Deepdale estate was mortgaged to the tune of forty thousand. No wonder that Mr Chester looked at his wits' ends as he sat there brooding over the melancholy fact.

It will naturally be asked, why did the man for the space of ten years spend twice as much as he received? In no case of this kind can an answer be given that will satisfy reasonable people. Early in life he had married a fashionable and extravagant wife. Then it was his duty to curb her extravagance. Nothing can well be clearer. Unfortunately, Mr Chester failed to do his duty. He found it easier to

mortgage and say nothing about it, than to meet his wife's frowns and sulks by direct prohibition. Not a man of an heroic mould, by any means. He had a horror of scenes, and would cheerfully have mortgaged his own person, if by so doing he could have avoided a conjugal quarrel.

He might perhaps have summoned up the necessary moral courage to curb his wife's extravagance at the outset, but for one little fact. He had, unknown to her, adventured five thousand pounds in a risky speculation, and lost it. To have revealed the condition of his finances at once to her, would have been to expose his own folly, an exposure from which he shrank. For Mrs Chester, like many other overbearing ladies, never pardoned any follies but her own; to these, it is almost needless to say, her charity was unbounded. To raise the five thousand he was compelled to mortgage, and as he got deeper and deeper into debt, mortgaging offered a ready way out of the difficulty. And in time he got so

used to it that, on raising each fresh loan, he felt something of the satisfaction of the spendthrift, who, when he renews a bill, murmurs piously to himself,—‘Thank Heaven ! that is settled.’

Regard him, as he sits there, looking aged and worn, oppressed with the prospect of the terrible ordeal through which he will shortly have to pass when he makes his wife acquainted with the state of affairs. In the pale, handsome features you seek in vain for a glimpse of strength of character, of will, of determination. What you read very plainly are irresolution, weakness, want of energy. Had he lived in the days of Noah, he would never have had pluck enough to build the Ark, but would have quietly waited for the Deluge to flow over him. If somebody else had built the Ark for him, he might have summoned up sufficient energy to walk into it in a leisurely kind of way. Altogether, a man totally unfitted for the duties of a husband and father.

He leaned his head upon his hand, and began to utter his thoughts aloud. 'The crash has come, and she must be told. How to tell her, there's the rub. I could go abroad for a few weeks, and explain it all in a letter. No. She would follow me, if it were to the Antipodes—she's a woman of such superabundant energy. Why didn't I make a clean breast of it last year, the year before, five years ago? Shall I get Chumleigh to tell her? Don't suppose Chumleigh would. Don't suppose she would believe Chumleigh if he did.'

The unhappy gentleman groaned in a dismal fashion, and entered on a new train of thought. 'After all, why should I be in such a funk? It's her extravagance that's the cause of it all. And it's her temper that has kept me silent so long.'

He rose and struck the table ferociously with his clenched fist. The traditional courage of all the defunct Chesters was beginning to flow back into the veins of their latest representative. 'Hang her

temper! I've given way too long. I've abdicated my position as master, as head of the house, too long. It shall end; it shall end this very day, this very moment!

He strode towards the bell, and was about to pull it violently. Suddenly he stopped, and the cold beads of perspiration started out upon his pale forehead. There flashed across him the vision of his wife when she had been told the news. He saw the awful fire in her eyes, he heard the awful anger of her tones, and the prospect sent his newly-acquired courage oozing through his palms. He crept back to his easy-chair, and began to calculate if the crash could be deferred till next year.

No, it could not; he speedily made up his mind to that. There was a difference between ruin and utter ruin. When a gentleman in the position of Mr Chester is said to be ruined, it means that he will be able to pick up from the wreck what would be looked upon by the majority of mankind as a handsome competence.

Presently he rose again, and this time with a less violent but more steadfast courage.

‘Tell Mrs Chester that I shall be obliged if she will give me a few minutes here,’ he said to the servant who answered the bell.

So many seconds of torturing suspense, and his wife made her appearance. She was a handsome woman, a fine specimen of the English matron, with a figure that forty years had not robbed of its youthful grace. She was considered an amiable person by the world, but to the close observer there was a cold severity about her eyes, a rigidity about her firmly-set lips, which would lead him to qualify that verdict. On the present occasion she happened to enter her husband’s library in a good mood, which was accounted for by the fact of her having to ask a favour of him. The wretched man shivered inwardly as he noted the well-known symptoms of amiability. The storm that succeeded such

an unusual calm would be doubly, trebly terrible.

‘I was just coming to see you on my own account, Algernon,’ she said in her pleasantest manner. ‘It is really too bad of you to keep us mewed up here this beautiful weather. Surely you could let us have a month in town, if I promised to be very economical. Katie is twenty, and not an offer yet; nobody in view even, except that horrid button man, Chumleigh. For her sake alone, we really ought to go. She’ll never get a husband in this desert of a place.’ And having delivered her views of the situation, Mrs Chester sank into the easiest chair in the room with a graceful languor all her own. As Geraldine Dacre, she was renowned for being the most graceful of girls.

Now, anybody can see that this opening gave Mr Chester a decided advantage. Not being quite destitute of wit, he hastened to seize it.

‘Are you aware, madam,’ he began

setting his face into the semblance of a flint, and speaking in such stern tones as he had never yet dared to use towards the partner of his joys and sorrows (?)—‘are you aware, madam, that my income is totally unable to bear the extravagant demands you make upon it?’

She elevated her eyebrows, and glanced somewhat disdainfully at her lord. She regarded this outburst as one of momentary spleen on the part of a niggardly spouse.

‘Really, Mr Chester, your language is very extraordinary. I believe it is the custom for people in our position to spend some portion of the season, at least, in town. I don’t know how you expect to get husbands for your daughters if you keep them mewed up for ever in the country. I don’t wish to be too severe’—with a graceful shrug of her shoulders—‘but you are really just a trifle too absurd.’

She was unconsciously making the task easier to her husband than he had hoped.



These disdainful glances and supercilious shruggings were serving to bring his wrath up to the point that makes a man regardless of consequences.

‘It is you who are absurd, madam, and of that I hope to convince you before I have finished,’ he cried, growing bolder with every word he uttered. ‘My income is a small one; for years you have insisted upon treating it as a large one. You married me, I believe, for love—’

At this point Mrs Chester elevated those expressive eyebrows of hers.

‘It is really so long ago,’ she murmured with a fine air of forgetfulness, ‘but it *may* be possible that I did.’

‘I have been weak, foolish—criminally foolish—in giving in to you as I have done,’ pursued the gentleman, beginning to get his words out at racing speed. ‘Your seasons in town, your balls, your dinner-parties, your thousand-and-one extravagancies, have played the very devil with my fortune. The result is that I

am a ruined man.' (He perceived the sudden look of horror that leapt into her face at these words, and went on at the pace of the Flying Dutchman.) 'Yes, Mrs Chester, a *ruined man*. The Deepdale property, at the outside, is worth eighty thousand. When I married you, it was absolutely unencumbered. *Now*, it is mortgaged to the tune of forty thousand. That amount is made up of sums raised, year after year, to pay the extra expenditure caused by your extravagant mode of living. I have kept it secret for years, hoping that something might happen—that somebody would die and leave me another fortune, that an earthquake might come and swallow us all up. And so now you know it all; and, thank Heaven, I haven't got to keep it to myself any longer!' And, with what sounded like a mighty sigh of relief, Mr Chester strode to the window, and gazed upon his mortgaged property, which looked so fair under the golden beams of the brilliant June sun.

But, strange as it may sound, he was not thinking of the comparative ruin which his contemptible cowardice of years had brought upon him. He was listening intently (with his back turned to the quarter whence it would proceed) for the first sounds of the tempest which experience warned him would quickly burst. He listened and listened for a long time ; then, emboldened by the unexpected silence, looked cautiously round, and became cognisant of a state of affairs for which he was totally unprepared.

His wife was leaning forward in the chair, one hand hanging limply down, the other supporting her cheek from which every vestige of colour had fled. He stole cautiously forward and surveyed her. Had she fainted ? No, she was not a fainting person. As he came closer, she shifted her attitude slightly, and, in a low voice, said,—‘ Ring for Jones.’

Jones was her maid, a servant of unsurpassed fidelity and discretion. Wild horses

would not drag from this paragon a secret that concerned the honour of the family. She was to be trusted at all hours and under all circumstances.

There are very few weak men who, if they get a chance, will not turn tyrannical. The passive condition of his wife—a condition so totally novel to his experience—emboldened Mr Chester, for the first time in his married career, to play the despot. It was a magnificent opportunity for paying off some old connubial scores.

‘I shall *not* ring for Jones,’ he said sternly. ‘It is your duty, madam, to remain here and assist me to prepare our future plans. When the question was one of spending, you were ready enough with your advice. Now that the question is one of retrenchment, I expect, I *command*—’

‘Ring the bell for Jones,’ interrupted Mrs Chester, in a voice which, although low, had something of the old awe-inspiring ring in it. ‘I have nothing to say to

you but this, that you are a monster, a heartless, false monster, who seeks to shift the burden of his guilt on to the shoulders of a poor, weak woman.'

Even in her collapsed state the lady was more than a match for her husband, with his evanescent and Dutch valour. He had a dim inkling of this, and advanced to pull the bell.

'For the present I will excuse you,' he said, making a poor effort to keep up the farce. 'But in a day or two I shall call upon you—'

'Oh that I had taken my poor father's advice!' murmured Mrs Chester at this point, in that thrilling low voice of hers. 'How earnestly did he urge me to accept Sir John! "True," said he, "true that Sir John is old enough to be your father, but he is emphatically a man—cautious, far-seeing, clever."'

'I wish to Heaven you had taken your father's advice,' cried Mr Chester, goaded by jealousy into a fresh rage. 'I should

have been richer by forty thousand pounds at the present moment.'

'Monster! incarnate monster!' came from the easy-chair. And there was no telling to what extent this worthy couple might have been carried by mutual recriminations, but for the timely arrival of the faithful Jones, who, in obedience to a faintly-spoken request, conducted her tottering mistress to her room.

When Mr Chester had grown cool, he began to congratulate himself on the comparative ease with which he had got through the business. The butterfly-nature of the man expanded under the knowledge that he was quit of a heavy burden, and would be able to throw the responsibility of future action upon stronger shoulders than his own.

'She'll plan something now she is fairly brought to bay. She has plenty of brains,' he thought, as he stood at the window. 'Perhaps the best plan would be for her to take the entire control of what is left,

allowing me a few hundreds a-year out of it. Egad, I should feel quite wealthy with three hundred to spend all on myself.'

He was interrupted in the midst of these reflections by the entrance of a servant, who announced Mr Chumleigh.

He turned round and welcomed his visitor with the greatest cordiality. Chumleigh was a safe man, a man who could be trusted ; he could confide in him. Strange inconsistency of human nature ! The man who was so foolishly reticent for ten years was going in a moment to the other extreme.





### CHAPTER III.

#### MR CHUMLEIGH DECLARES HIMSELF.

**J**OSEPH CHUMLEIGH, the 'horrid button man' referred to by Mrs Chester in her interview with her husband, was a gentleman of about thirty years of age, or thereabouts. There was nothing in his appearance to distinguish him in any great degree from the average mass of mankind. He was about the middle height, and homely-looking as regards figure and features.

He did not belong by birth to the upper classes, his father having commenced life with the traditional fourpence-halfpenny, and having amassed a fortune by the manufacture of buttons. Joseph Chum-



48 *Mr Chumleigh declares Himself.*

leigh made his entrance into the world when his father had fallen on good times, and received a liberal education in consequence. He had proved himself to be possessed of brains by the fact of taking honours at Cambridge, a performance which preceded by a few weeks the death of the button-maker. Being the only child, he inherited every penny which had been scraped together by his father's enterprise, and was considered by the majority of mammas and their daughters a very desirable catch.

This was the general opinion, but there were a few ultra-aristocratic people—amongst them being Mrs Chester—who could not forgive him the fact of the 'buttons' and the lack of a grandfather. His education, his agreeable manners, his kindness of heart—these went for next to nothing with such fastidious persons.

For the last eighteen months he had been laying a steady and persistent siege to the affections of the eldest Miss Chester,

who was by no means insensible to the 'sweet observances' with which he encompassed her. She had hardly dared, however, to show her appreciation of the amorous Joseph openly, for the very sufficient reason that her mother sternly resented that gentleman's presumption in aspiring to the hand of any daughter of hers.

Mrs Chester was blessed, or cursed, with a lofty soul. Had she been a man, I believe she would have achieved a greatness at which the world would never have ceased blinking its wondering eyes. To the ordinary mind, a duchess conveys the idea of overpowering social magnificence and splendour. But there were few living duchesses to whom Mrs Chester could not have given points in the matter of personal dignity. Dignity declared itself in her voice, her walk, her gesture. Her ideas, like her soul, were all large, and especially large where her children were concerned. That the son of a defunct

50 *Mr Chumleigh declares Himself.*

manufacturer of buttons should dare to lift his plebeian gaze so high as to one in whose veins flowed the pure blood of the Dacres and the Chesters, seemed to her something monstrous. The lovers, therefore, had carried on their gentle dalliance in secret, trusting their cause to the championship of Time which sometimes fights on the side of Cupid.

‘How d’ye do, Chester? You are not looking well—seem anxious, worried. Nothing wrong, I hope,’ said Mr Chumleigh, as he shook hands with the owner of Deepdale.

‘Everything is wrong,’ returned the other solemnly. ‘To put it as briefly as possible, Chumleigh, I’m in a devil of a mess.’

‘Sorry to hear it,’ said Mr Chumleigh briefly. He was a kind-hearted man, a man full of sympathy, but he was not given to effusiveness, either in speech or gesture. ‘Sorry to hear it. I suppose it’s money; at your age, it’s sure to be

money. If you were twenty years younger, I should suspect it was a woman.'

'It *is* money,' replied Mr Chester. And then, in tones that faltered somewhat, he told his visitor the same tale that he had previously told his wife.

It is almost needless to say that Joseph Chumleigh was intensely surprised by the news, still more surprised at the fact of Chester having drifted towards ruin year after year with such apparent nonchalance. This surprise he put into words.

'My dear fellow, why the deuce didn't you pull up the first year?'

Mr Chester regarded his friend with a look full of compassion for his ignorance in putting such a question.

'My dear Chumleigh, you are not a married man. If you ever experience that misfortune, you will understand many things that are hidden from you now.'

'That may be,' said Mr Chumleigh, with that quiet smile of his which revealed more than his words. 'I have the plea-

52 *Mr Chumleigh declares Himself.*

sure of Mrs Chester's acquaintance, and, as a result, I fully appreciate your difficulties. But you have had to make a clean breast of it; you must have known that the day would come when you *would* have to make a clean breast of it. Why not have told first as well as last? The difference to your pocket would have been immense; the difficulty of telling would have been no greater.'

Mr Chester shook his head at such flimsy sophistry. 'You are an admirable theorist, Chumleigh; that I admit. I will content myself by asking you to wait till you are married. If you tell anything to your wife till you are obliged, *then*, I'll give you leave to call me a fool to my face.'

'I will bear in mind your generous offer,' said Chumleigh. Then, when he had said this, he reclined his head upon his hand, and plunged apparently into a state of profound meditation.

Mr Chester probably thought this was

not quite the way in which a visitor should behave ; for, after waiting a little time, he addressed him rather sharply.

‘It’s all very well for you to go to sleep there, Chumleigh, but let me remind you this is a frightful state of things. It’s an awful wrench to be torn root and branch from the home which has sheltered one’s ancestors for generations. By gad, I shall never survive it ; I shall never leave Deepdale alive.’ Mr Chester paused for a moment, to control the emotions which had impelled him to indulge in so much sentiment. ‘How would *you* like to be kicked out of the home of your ancestors ?’ he asked, with a sudden access of wrath at the other’s obstinate silence.

‘I never had any ancestors, in the sense you mean ; unless, when my father bought Fairmead, he took the ancestors along with the fixtures,’ replied Mr Chumleigh quietly. ‘And I wasn’t asleep, as you fancied, Chester. I was thinking over what you said. It’s a frightful thing for

54 *Mr Chumleigh declares Himself.*

you, and '—more slowly—' still more frightful for your family.'

'The calamity has been brought about by the extravagance of my family,' cried the other warmly.

Mr Chumleigh shook his head with gentle obstinacy. 'You were the pilot, Chester; you could have made the vessel sail in what direction you willed.'

'By gad, you'd sing a different song if you were married,' said Mr Chester bitterly. 'When you've a self-willed wife and three daughters of your own, you'll find out that you'll have to steer as they tell you.'

Mr Chumleigh did not pursue the argument, it being one of his maxims that it is a sheer waste of time to attempt to convince a fool of his folly. If Chester hadn't been a fool, he would not have been in the position he was. And being a fool, it was not likely that he would be converted to wisdom so late in life. He remained silent for a good time longer, in

that thoughtful attitude, with that thoughtful expression on his face which had already so exasperated his companion.

‘I think this is an opportunity for me to table a matter which has been long in my mind,’ he said at length. As a rule, Mr Chumleigh was one of the most self-possessed of men, but on the present occasion his usual calm seemed to have deserted him, for his words were spoken in a hesitating fashion, and he was actually blushing. ‘I suppose you have not been blind—you have guessed—you have seen my admiration for Kit—for Miss Chester.’

‘I have,’ replied Mr Chester briefly. Strange to say, he blushed also.

Mr Chumleigh read the meaning of his friend’s confusion. ‘Your wife is my enemy; is it not so?’

‘I don’t quite understand what you imply by the word enemy, Chumleigh.’

‘I imply this: that Mrs Chester would not have been pleased to accept me as a son-in-law.’



56 *Mr Chumleigh declares Himself.*

‘You ask me a plain question, Chumleigh, and I’ll give you a plain answer. My wife has many good points, but she is a peculiar woman in many respects. Speaking in strict confidence,’ added this candid husband, leaning forward and lowering his voice to a whisper, ‘I am not *quite* sure, that if my time were to come over again, I should—er—you understand me, I am sure.’

‘Perfectly,’ said Chumleigh drily. ‘I have heard the same sentiments from many married men of my acquaintance. You have not directly answered my question, but I conclude from your manner that Mrs Chester would *not* have welcomed me as a son-in-law.’

‘I don’t think she would have been overjoyed at the prospect, I must admit.’

‘She looked higher for her daughter, as a matter of course,’ said Joseph Chumleigh, in a voice of some bitterness. ‘She wished Kitty—Miss Chester, I should say—to marry some fat-headed squire.’

‘I don’t know that there was any absolute necessity for him to be fat-headed,’ returned Mr Chester mildly. ‘But she is a woman who sets great store by birth and family, and all that sort of thing. She has a horror—pardon my speaking so plainly, Chumleigh—she has a horror of trade.’

‘And you perhaps share her sentiments?’

‘Well, no,’ said Mr Chester, with perfect frankness. ‘At the present moment, the only thing I have a horror of is poverty. *That* engrosses my whole stock of detestation.’

‘Then I have your permission to speak to Kitty?’

‘Ye-es, certainly.’ Mr Chester tried to put decision both into his voice and manner; but the attempt was not altogether successful. He had been so long accustomed to take a back seat in all matters relating to domestic government, contenting himself with the merely minor functions of paying bills, raising money on

58 *Mr Chumleigh declares Himself.*

mortgage, and carrying out his wife's behests, that he could not readily assume the manner of a perfectly free agent.

'And what about Mrs Chester?' asked Joseph Chumleigh presently. 'Will her attitude be altered by this change of circumstances, do you think?'

Mr Chester shrugged his shoulders, in intimation of his inability to give a decided answer to that question.

'My dear fellow, can you ever speak with any certainty of a woman?'

But surely you must know something of your wife's temperament. Twenty years of married life—'

'Twenty years of fiddlestick!' interrupted the other discourteously. 'When I married my wife, I *thought* I knew her character to a nicety; every young man who marries, does. Twenty years of domestic bliss, my dear Chumleigh, have confirmed me in the opinion that I was a conceited ass to indulge in such a supposition. I utterly decline to commit myself

by hazarding a guess as to what Mrs Chester will think, or do, or say, under any circumstances whatsoever.'

He delivered this tirade with such energy and deep feeling, that Mr Chumleigh was forced to smile, in spite of his anxiety.

'I must take my chance, then,' he said resignedly. It was evident that Mr Chester was utterly useless as an ally. 'Is Kitty in the house?'

'No; she and Gerty are spending the day at the Rectory. She will be back to dinner.'

'I might call to-morrow, then,' suggested Chumleigh.

'Come in to-night, and get it over,' said Chester, with wonderful good-nature. 'I would ask you to dinner; but really, under the circumstances, I don't know whether we shall have any dinner.'

'How did Mrs Chester take the news?'

'In a wonderfully quiet fashion, for her. But I expect that is only the calm before

60 *Mr Chumleigh declares Himself.*

the storm. In a day or two we shall have to look out for squalls. Perhaps you wouldn't mind putting me up at your place for a week, when the storm *does* burst.'

'With pleasure,' said Chumleigh absently; he was thinking of his own concerns. 'Yes, I will come this evening. As your wife is not quite in her usual form, I shall have a better chance. And by the way, Chester, I have not said much in the way of condolence; but if things turn out right between Kitty and me, I daresay something can be done. Of course, I can't offer you money myself.'

'No, of course not,' assented the other hastily.

'But if I marry Kitty'— as he said this, a very tender light came into Joseph Chumleigh's eyes—'I shall make a handsome settlement upon her, and she can do what she likes with her own. I hope you understand what I'm driving at.'

'Yes, I do,' cried Mr Chester, with a suspicious tremble in his tones. 'But,

hang it, Chumleigh! that sha'n't be. If you marry Kitty, you marry her, and there's an end of it. If things had been as they were, you wouldn't have been allowed to have her. I know my wife well enough for that. So you owe us nothing, my dear boy, and you shall pay us nothing. We don't deserve it, that's the plain truth.'

For a moment Chumleigh stared at his companion in some amazement, then he took Chester's hand and wrung it fervently. 'Chester, you're a gentleman,' he said, in a voice full of respect.

'And you're another,' cried Mr Chester, with equal fervour.

Shortly after, the 'horrid button man' departed. As he passed through the hall, he saw little Sydney (aged seven), the only son and heir of the Deepdale estates, the heir who was so long in coming that his arrival had been altogether despaired of.

Sydney ran to him, and began to prattle,

62 *Mr Chumleigh declares Himself.*

as all children did when they saw Joseph Chumleigh. After a lengthened and confidential interview, the latter bade him good-bye and mounted his horse, with a very thoughtful expression on his face.

‘Poor little Syd,’ he thought as he rode back to Fairmead. ‘It’s awfully hard lines for him. We must see what we can do to make his future brighter. But it’s an ill wind that blows nobody good. By to-night it will possibly have blown me a wife.’





## CHAPTER IV.

### KATIE'S LOVER.



LOVELY summer evening. The air was balmy with the warm odour of flowers that had lately leapt into bloom and fragrance under the glowing kisses of the sun. The western sky was a glowing mass of subtly-blended colour, of gold and purple and opal. The evening star had just crept out, and hung bright and shining, a solitary jewel set in a cloudless ring of blue. The lilac and laburnum trees, heavy with their fragrant burden of sweet-scented blossoms, stood tall and motionless in the languid, breathless air. The musical, mystical song



of the summer sea alone broke the dreamy silence of nature.

Mr Chester was seated on the lawn, smoking his post-prandial cigar, dinner having been served as usual, in spite of his gloomy forebodings to the contrary. Around him were grouped his three fair daughters, Katie, Lenore, and Gertrude.

Not that Katie was strictly handsome, like her sisters. She had a lithe, graceful figure, a brilliant complexion and good teeth, and these exhausted the list of her charms. Her nose was undecided, and defied any attempts at accurate classification. Her mouth was too large, while her eyes were too small, and neither glowed with the deep fire of genius nor the thrilling light of beauty. The shape of her face suggested, to persons unpleasantly gifted with the faculty of comparison, too obvious a resemblance to that of the full moon.

It might be objected that this is hypercriticism ; I fear it is. Teeth, com-

plexion, figure, go a long way towards making a handsome woman. When Katie was dressed out in her best bib and tucker, the general effect was pleasing. And as we already know, there was one man at least amongst her acquaintance who adored her and thought her perfection. Still, she was not a Helen of Troy, a Diana of Poitiers. Even her mother, in her most ambitious moods, had not aspired beyond a baronet for her husband.

The family group was completed by Master Sydney, a winsome, little fair-haired fellow, who was in a mild way the tyrant of the family, as his mother was a tyrant in a way that was the reverse of mild. All his sisters adored him, but Lenore's worship of her baby-brother approached fanaticism. At this period of her career I believe she had solemnly made up her mind to decline all and any proposals of marriage that might be made to her, in order that she should the better devote herself to his interests.

When he was fairly launched on the world, and entrusted to the care of a capable wife—that is to say, about twenty years hence—she might give her attention to such matters, but not before.

Lenore and Katie were fair. Gertrude, the third daughter, relieved the monotony. She was a brunette, with fine, black eyes, dark hair with a peculiar rich gloss of its own, a Grecian nose, and a handsome mouth. She might have been thought as beautiful as Lenore—more beautiful, perhaps, save for the lack of that which is to beauty of form and feature what the perfume is to the flower, what song is to the bird,—namely, expression.

As I have observed before, it was evening. It was in the afternoon that Mr Chester communicated to his wife the news of his pecuniary position. Much had happened in the interval. Katie and Gertrude had returned from their visit to the Rectory, and been made acquainted with the disastrous state of affairs. The three

girls had held a secret court of investigation among themselves, the result of their deliberations being a partial acquittal of their father of the severe charges brought against him by Mrs Chester.

It was all very well for that overbearing lady to accuse him of having wilfully squandered their patrimony, but the sense of justice which resides in most youthful bosoms would not permit them to agree with their mamma. They saw too clearly that it was the extravagance of his woman-kind which had brought about his and their ruin. Unlimited dress, unlimited party-giving, indulgence in a thousand-and-one luxuries incompatible with their income—these were what had necessitated that perpetual drain upon capital. True that they could not acquit him of cowardly weakness, of a certain heartless indifference to their united welfare. But they also took into their merciful calculations the extreme violence of their mother's temper, and almost found it in their hearts

to excuse that constant shuffling off of the evil day.

Mrs Chester was absent from the family circle. She preferred to sit in majestic solitude, attended by the faithful and sympathising Jones. Lenore, fortified by the consciousness of being her favourite child, had ventured to visit her at intervals, but the others had kept discreetly away. When Mrs Chester had even the smallest grievance, she was terribly heavy on hand. At the present time, with such legitimate cause for despondency, Cassandra would have been a cheerful person in comparison. And although the girls felt acutely the altered condition of things, their youth protected them from excessive lugubriousness.

They were awaiting the arrival of Joseph Chumleigh. Mr Chester had communicated to Katie the details of the interview which had taken place between him and that gentleman in the library.

‘You had better accept him, my dear,’

had been his advice. 'I might have looked higher for you myself once, but the future doesn't seem very promising ; and I believe he'll make you an excellent husband. So, if you take my advice, you'll look over the buttons and accept a good chance when it's offered you.'

Miss Katie had blushed a rosy red while her father was urging her to accept Joseph Chumleigh's offer, and had retreated to her chamber very quickly, without saying much upon the subject. But she subsequently confided to Lenore that the idea of reigning at Fairmead was not altogether displeasing to her. And this admission, coming from a girl of Katie's somewhat shy temperament, meant more than the mere words suggested.

'Oh, of course, you'll be glad enough to say Yes,' Lenore had observed, with a superior smile. 'I've noticed how spoony you have been on each other for a long time ; only you were both afraid of mother.'

‘Well, it’s useless her objecting now,’ Katie had retorted with great spirit. ‘We shall have to take the ordering of our destinies into our own hands, if we want to avoid dying old maids.’

Lenore and Gertrude were not so absorbed in their grief at the loss of fortune as not to speculate on the details of the forthcoming interview. As for Katie, she wore the air of a woman who listens, whose soul is in her ears. And when Joseph Chumleigh did make his appearance, a lovely blush overspread her face and made her look doubly charming in the eyes of the enraptured lover.

‘Sorry you didn’t come sooner, Chumleigh,’ said Mr Chester good-naturedly. ‘We did dine after all; and a very good dinner too. Mrs Chester wasn’t there,’ he added in a lower tone, and with an ingenious connection of ideas that did honour to his head if not to his heart.

‘I daresay I shouldn’t have had much appetite under the circumstances,’ replied

the other quickly. But whether the circumstances he alluded to were connected with his host's misfortunes, or his forthcoming relations with Katie, he did not explain.

'My appetite is the one thing that never deserts me,' resumed Mr Chester cheerfully. 'Thank Heaven, I can always eat. I remember, when a very young man, losing a couple of thousand over the Derby; I don't think I ever made a heartier dinner than on that day. I suppose it's a matter of temperament.'

'I suppose it is,' assented Joseph Chumleigh drily. He stole a look at the three girls in turn, and saw that they had been weeping copiously. Then he looked back again at the smiling, debonair father, and marvelled at the lightness of spirit of some men.

'How is Mrs Chester?' he whispered presently.

'So, so, I believe,' returned her husband, in a low voice that only reached Chumleigh's ears. 'She has isolated her-



self in her own room, and refuses to be comforted. At the present moment, I have no wish that she should issue from her retirement.'

Joseph Chumleigh regarded him with a look of genuine surprise. Surely this was not quite the way in which to treat so serious a matter, to talk of the estrangement between himself and wife as if it had been brought about by the most trifling domestic tiff.

Mr Chester noted the meaning of that glance, and had the grace to colour. 'I daresay you think I am a queer fellow. But the fact is, this is the first time I've breathed freely for many years. I feel as if I had got rid of a tremendous burden. Confession is good for the soul, you know. Those poor Roman Catholic devils who confess to their priest, must find it a great relief. Only Mrs Chester doesn't quite resemble the priest in this respect, that she fails to give absolution.'

The light, airy nature of the man re-

vealed itself even in his excuse for his lightness. So much Chumleigh perceived, and, perceiving, felt it was absurd to be serious with such a creature. 'A child, a big, mischievous child,' he said to himself as he turned away from the unwelcome spectacle to gaze upon a sweeter sight, namely, his Katie's—

'Lid, that seldom rises ;  
Few her looks, but every one,  
Like unexpected light, surprises !'

'Will you come for a turn? it is such a lovely evening,' he whispered presently. And Katie, with the tell-tale colour coming and going on her fair cheek, rose and walked away with him. Her sisters watched them out of sight with looks of serious and solemn approval, and heart-felt interest.

'I wonder what he will say?' mused Lenore.

'We'll make her tell us after he has left,' said Gertrude in a brisk tone.

The elder sister shook her head with

a doubtful smile. 'I think she'll keep what he says to herself. It isn't as if she didn't care for him; in that case she would be less likely to make a secret of it,' observed this profound student of human nature.

'What a shame!' cried Gerty indignantly. 'In a family so united as ours, all that sort of thing ought to be common property. When anybody proposes to you, I shall expect you to tell me every word he says.'

'Certainly, dear,' replied Lenore meekly. All the same, I doubt if she will keep her promise.

Meanwhile, Katie and her lover had reached the low wall which was the scene of Bob Farquhar's proposal a few hours earlier. History has a knack of repeating itself in this way. Then when they had arrived at this boundary, Joseph Chumleigh took heart of grace, and began in somewhat faltering tones—for his life's happiness was staked upon her Yes or No.

‘Katie, I’m not much of a hand at fine speeches. But it ought not to take a man long to tell a girl that he loves her very dearly, and would do his best to make her happy as his wife. Katie darling, do you think you can say Yes?’

He waited some little time for an answer, his heart beating tumultuously the while. Then, under shadow of the kindly twilight, she lifted up her shy eyes to his, and murmured in a very low voice the words,—

‘I think I can.’

Simpler or more common-place words there could hardly be, but they were words which were engraven for ever on Joseph Chumleigh’s memory. He will never look on the summer starlight, or listen to the soft, mystical song of the summer sea, but they will recur to him, bringing a vision of serious, shy eyes looking timidly into his own, and a fair face painted with the tremulous blush of love.

‘You shall never know a minute’s care

or sorrow henceforth, if I can help it, my darling,' he said, with a great tenderness in his voice. Then presently he fumbled in his pocket, and pulled out a tiny box, from which he drew a sparkling ring.

'Let me seal our compact,' he said, drawing nearer, with the intention of slipping it on her finger.

But she retreated a little, with some signs of confusion. 'You must have been very certain that I should say Yes,' she observed.

'I was not certain, but I thought it as well to have it in readiness,' replied Chumleigh simply.

'And supposing I had said No, the ring would have been a dead loss to you—unless you could have chosen another girl whose finger was the exact size of mine.'

'In that case, the loss of the ring would have been so trifling in comparison with the loss of you, that I should not have noticed it,' retorted Joseph Chumleigh with commendable readiness. And so agreeably

did this compliment impress her, that when he approached the second time to slip it on her finger, she suffered him to do so without further opposition.

But the moment it had become her property, a new idea suggested itself to her. 'I hope it hasn't done duty in this way before,' she said slyly.

Joseph Chumleigh laughed heartily at her suspicions. 'No, upon my honour, it hasn't. I rode over to Silvertown this afternoon and bought it, entirely upon speculation.'

Much relieved by so solemn an assurance, Katie thanked him for it very sweetly. And presently her evident delight in the sparkling toy impressed Chumleigh with a boldness foreign to his character. Daring thoughts began to shape themselves in his brain. Daring desires began to suggest themselves to his enraptured soul.

'I say,' he observed, edging very close to her, and with a gay fire in his eyes that made him look a different and handsomer

Joseph Chumleigh,—‘ I say, don’t you think a fellow deserves some reward for bringing you such a nice present ?’

Katie looked up at him with a very demure expression. ‘ What reward do you want, Mr Chumleigh ?’

‘ Don’t call me Mr Chumleigh ; call me Joseph,’ he entreated tenderly. ‘ I regret, for your sake, that it is not a more romantic, a more high-sounding name. But let us be thankful it isn’t worse. It was within a touch of being Samuel, a favourite name of my father’s ; but at the last moment my mother exerted unusual strength of mind, and averted the calamity. Call me Joseph.’

‘ What reward do you want—Joseph ?’ murmured Katie in a dove-like tone.

He hesitated a moment ; his request was such a bold one. ‘ A kiss,’ he ventured at length to whisper.

Katie hesitated in her turn : it was a proposal that demanded consideration. This was the first time that Mr Chumleigh had claimed the sweet privileges of a lover. In

her heart she rather respected him for his audacity.

‘I will allow you to—to kiss me,’ she said at length. ‘Stop a moment. There are here five diamonds; we will say they are worth five kisses.’ (Katie put a high price upon her kisses, you perceive.) ‘You shall give me one now, two the next time you see me, and the rest the time after.’

Mr Chumleigh seemed to consider this a fair and equitable arrangement. He gave her her one kiss, and grew remarkably red over the process. He had not enjoyed a vast experience with regard to young ladies.

Katie was also deeply moved. The beauty of her ring, her lover's promptitude in purchasing it, and last—but by no means least—his gentlemanly conduct in not taking more than the solitary kiss to which she restricted him, impressed her with strong feelings of gratitude and esteem, to which she yearned to give utterance.



It was in a faltering voice that she spoke, as she laid her hand gently upon his arm. 'Joseph, I will try my best to make you a *nice wife*.'

I will not chronicle Chumleigh's reply, nor, indeed, will I chronicle any further details of this interview. There is a poetry, there is a romance about such scenes, which should make them sacred, and protect them from the prying gaze of the novelist and his readers. It is enough to know that heart spoke to heart, and soul communed with soul.

The night was far advanced when Mr Chumleigh quitted Deepdale. The latter part of the evening had been spent in the drawing-room, after a very quiet fashion. There had been no playing or singing, since any attempt at festivity might have been out of place under such a phase of the family misfortunes. And most assuredly, sounds of a joyful nature would have constituted a deadly and deliberate insult

to the unhappy lady who was isolating herself in majestic solitude upstairs.

Mr Chumleigh walked home in a very delightful frame of mind. To begin with, it was a faultless night. The gentle silence was sweeter than the sweetest music to a contemplative spirit. From her serene and Olympian summit, the moon smiled softly on the quiet sea and the sleeping earth. Now and then a wandering breeze, soft as the flutter of falling petals on a summer lawn, stole in and out of the drowsy trees.

The beauty of it all entered into Joseph Chumleigh's heart, and disposed him to thankful meditation. He fell to thinking of Katie's eyes, as they had beamed on him with an expression of shy consciousness when he bade her good-night. Katie's eyes, as I have previously observed, were not at all remarkable; but to Chumleigh they shone with the radiance of summer stars, and promised to shed the soft, mystical light of love upon his future.

Presently he began to sing gently for very joy, and out of the fulness of his heart which imperatively demanded an outlet of some sort. And this is what he sang, inspired by the thrilling remembrance of Katie's shy orbs,—

‘Drink to me only with thine eyes,  
And I will pledge with mine;  
Or leave a kiss within the cup,  
And I'll not look for wine.’

There was nobody to hear him, except the man in the moon, or a wakeful bird, or some other unappreciative member of the animal world. So, after a little interval, he went on with the second verse,—

‘The thirst that from the soul doth rise,  
Doth ask a drink divine;  
But might I of Chester's nectar sip,  
I would not change for thine.’

‘Poor old Chester!’ he muttered in a reflective tone, when he had finished singing. ‘It strikes me he'll have to go rather short, in the matter of nectar,

in the future. And yet their misfortunes have given me my happiness. That stuck-up old cat of a mother would have turned up her nose finely at the presumption of the "button man," if things had been as they were.'

From these uncomplimentary remarks, it will be seen that there was about the usual amount of love lost between Mr Joseph and his future mother-in-law.

'And really,' said Gertrude later on, in confidential intercourse with Lenore, and speaking with the unconscious cruelty of beauty, 'considering that Katie has nothing to boast of in the way of good looks, and that we are next door to paupers, I am of opinion she has done wonderfully well.'

And Katie was of the same opinion.





## CHAPTER V.

### MR CHESTER ASSERTS HIMSELF.

**I** THINK this affair of yours had better be finally settled,' said Mr Chester, the next morning, to his eldest born. 'Will you go to your mother, and say that I should be glad to have some conversation with her, either here or in her own room, which she prefers.'

Katie obeyed, and shortly returned with an elegant little three-cornered note addressed to her father. Mr Chester opened it, and read as follows:—'For the present, at least, I should prefer that any intercourse between us be conducted by letter.'

He sat down to his desk with an utter absence of temper that provoked his daughter's admiration.

'Got a polite letter writer anywhere, Katie?' he asked good-humouredly.

'No, dear,' she replied, smiling at the absurdity of the question.

'That's a pity,' he said gravely. 'I might pick up a wrinkle as to the style in which married people should correspond when separated under the same roof. Never mind; I must rely upon my own unaided powers. Here goes.'

And after a few moments of reflection, he produced the following elegantly-turned missive:—'Mr Chester presents his compliments to Mrs Chester, and begs to inform her that Joseph Chumleigh of Fairmead has proposed for the hand of their eldest daughter. Settlements, etc., will be arranged to mutual satisfaction. Mr Chester approves of the engagement, and would be glad to learn Mrs Chester's views thereon at her earliest convenience.'

‘There, my dear, read that,’ he said, handing it to the expectant Katie. ‘Admire the beauty of the composition, and the courtier-like style. When you have done all this, fold it neatly and carry it to your mamma.’

‘She will be so angry; she will say you are turning her into ridicule,’ cried Katie.

‘Egad, she is turning herself into ridicule, only her sense of humour is not sufficiently developed to enable her to perceive it. She chooses correspondence, and I correspond—in my own style. There, run away, and bring an answer as quickly as possible.’

When Katie had retired on her embarrassing errand, her father stretched himself comfortably in his easy-chair and began to soliloquise. ‘I wonder whether she is going to play this game for the remaining term of her natural life. I think I should prefer it, when I had got my hand in a bit. It’s so much

easier to write anything unpleasant than to say it; and my communications are not likely to be of a pleasant character for some time to come. A little awkward for the servants perhaps, but then you can never hide anything from *them*.'

He was suddenly interrupted in his musings by the arrival of Lenore. 'I have come to ask your advice, papa,' she explained, seating herself on a stool at his feet.

'The deuce you have,' said Mr Chester. 'Since your mother's retirement into private life at three o'clock yesterday afternoon, I seem to have been thrust into a most prominent position. Nobody ever asked my advice much before. I'm not used to this wholesale kind of consultation. Never mind. Say your say, my dear.'

'What about my visit to Uncle Dacre's in August? Shall I go or not?'

'Better ask your mother about that.'



'I have asked her, and she says she will not give an opinion.'

'Has she really abdicated?' asked Mr Chester with mild curiosity. 'This is a pretty state of things. I'm to be Prime Minister as well as Chancellor of the Exchequer, eh? Well, really, my dear, I think you had better go, as you've promised.'

'I don't care about it, you know, papa. Uncle Dacre is an odious old man.'

'I know he is,' assented her father in a sympathetic tone. 'Sweetness of temper does not run in the Dacre family. But then he is rich. Odious old men generally are; it's a way they have. Easy-going, good-natured creatures like me always get in a mess. It's your sour, cantankerous old hunk who waxes fat and prosperous.'

'There's no chance of anything in that quarter, dear,' said Lenore emphatically. 'The Partlet girls have got him under their thumbs.'

‘The Partlet girls are no doubt charming damsels, barring a slight lankiness of form, and a tendency to æsthetics and the worship of the lily,’ observed her parent in a meditative tone. ‘But still, Sir Herbert may be just a trifle tired of *toujours* Partlet. Your bonnie face may produce an agreeable impression upon the old rogue. You have asked me for my advice; my advice is, Go.’

‘Very well, so be it,’ said the girl carelessly.

She cared not, as she had told him, whether she went or not. How could she foresee, any more than the rest of us, what great events will often spring from the most trivial actions of life? How could she guess the malign influence which a brief visit to a cantankerous and spiteful old man would exercise upon her destiny?

‘And what are we going to do about the future, papa? Shall we have to leave Deepdale?’ she asked presently, her eyes filling with tears.

Mr Chester shifted uneasily in his chair. 'If mine was the sole voice raised in the matter, I should certainly say we will *not* leave Deepdale. We can live here as cheaply as anywhere, if we practise economy, if we reduce things all round. But, of course, your mother may think it necessary for us to play the martyr, to hide ourselves in Boulogne or some other place especially created for decayed gentry.'

Talk of an angel, etc.! Hardly had Mr Chester completed this somewhat uncomplimentary allusion to his spouse, than she appeared *in propria persona*, followed by Katie, who looked pale and frightened.

It was but too evident that Mrs Chester had come upon no peaceful errand. Long experience enabled her hapless husband to recognise the symptoms of a wrath that would not be lightly turned aside. The steely glitter of her eyes, the steadfast glow upon her cheeks, the hurried

pace betrayed a 'noble rage' that even the prospect of chill penury could not repress.

In her outstretched hand, that trembled with passion, she held the fatal letter of which Katie had been the bearer, and which had brought her from her retirement.

'What is the meaning of this, your latest insult, Mr Chester?' she demanded in her deep tones. 'Is not my cup already full enough? Is it not sufficient that you have reduced me and my children to beggary, that you have condemned us all to a sordid future? Must you add to these injuries a still more deadly insult?'

As she reached this point in her impassioned harangue, she cast the offending epistle from her. It is probable that her intention was to fling it on the floor. But her passion lent her such strength, that it went in a different direction from what she intended, and hit her husband upon the nose.

He jumped up at this apparent declaration of hostilities. 'Will you have the kindness to explain yourself?' he cried.

'How dare you send me such a letter as that?' said the incensed lady. 'I suppose you think it manly to play off your wit upon a broken-hearted woman.'

'I believe it was your own request that our intercourse should be carried on by correspondence,' suggested Mr Chester, with a rather dangerous politeness.

'It was. But I did not expect that you would play the jester at my expense. The rôle of a *farceur* comes naturally to a man who—'

'Hold!' cried her husband, in such a thundering voice that the girls jumped, and even their mother paused in the midst of her invective. 'Enough of this.'

He drew himself up to his full height, and assumed an attitude of dignity and command. For the first time in his married career, he seemed to be about

to meet his wife on equal terms. Whence did he derive the courage that prompted this sudden change of front? I cannot tell you. Perhaps it was his desperate condition which made him brave. Perhaps it was the presence of his children that restored his self-esteem.

‘Mrs Chester,’ he began, in slow, impressive tones, ‘it is you who have made yourself ridiculous by taking up such an attitude. And if I appear equally ridiculous—a fact which I will not dispute—it is because I have fallen in with your mood. Since the day on which we became man and wife, it has been my shame and disgrace that I have *always* fallen in with your moods. For the last ten miserable years my foolish horror of scenes, my dread of provoking your violent temper, have made me engage in a course of duplicity at which I blush. From this day I mean to turn over a new leaf.’

As he gave utterance to this valiant resolution, he brought his clenched right

hand down upon the open palm of his left, with a force that made the girls indulge in a faint scream, and compelled Mrs Chester to sink upon the nearest chair. He saw the advantage which this unexpected assumption of manliness had given him, and hastened to follow it up.

‘In the past you have been master, and mistress too. In the future you will have to submit to a great change. You shall be mistress if you please ; but, by Heaven, I will be master !’

There is a general opinion prevalent that tyrants are a cowardly race, and, if fairly brought to bay, will not fail to speedily show the white feather. Whether or not this idea be confirmed by the teachings of experience, I will not stay to examine. It is enough to say that Mrs Chester appeared completely cowed at the present moment. Her lofty head, which she was wont to hold so high with pride, drooped disconsolately upon her bosom. That deep and commanding voice of hers was

hushed; it being in the faintest of whispers that she entreated Katie to 'ring for Jones.'

The obedience of years was strong upon Katie; she moved towards the bell, but was arrested by the thundering tones of her father.

'Stay where you are. Your mother has exposed herself to the servants enough as it is. I will no longer have my domestic concerns made the common property of the whole county. Take her to her room yourselves.'

Meekly the girls obeyed. Meekly did the erst invincible Mrs Chester suffer herself to be guided from her husband's presence by her two daughters. When they reached the door, he gave his crushed consort a parting shot.

'And in the future, madam, whenever you address me, either verbally or by letter, let it be with the respect due to your husband, and the father of your children.'



The door closed upon this magnificent peroration. Left to himself, for some minutes Mr Chester stood pluming and congratulating himself upon his decisive victory. Then presently the man's deep sense of humour, his keen appreciation of the ridiculous, asserted themselves, and disposed him to meditations of a different kind.

‘That is what is called, in vulgar parlance, “taking the bull by the horns.” Why haven’t I taken the bull by the horns any time within these ten years? Bah! What use to ask such a question? Revolutions are ever slow things. See what a nation will submit to before it revolts against despotism. Is it a less difficult matter for an individual to revolt than a nation? No. Think of what the French people endured before they summoned up pluck enough to chop off Louis the Sixteenth’s fat head. I am desperate; therefore I have risen. Citizen Chester has proclaimed the Domestic

Republic. Down with all wives. *Vive la Liberté!*'

An hour later Katie entered the room with a somewhat beating heart. She was not quite assured in her own mind as to whether this sudden assumption of authority on her parent's part might not be the first symptom of insanity. She was relieved to find that his countenance wore the calm and collected expression of a man who was perfectly responsible for his actions. He received her with a kindly smile, but when he spoke, she was astonished at the new ring of dignity in his voice.

'I am sorry, my dear, that you and Lenore should have been witnesses to such a scene. I trust that the attitude I have taken to-day will prevent the recurrence of such painful incidents. With regard to the future, I may as well take this opportunity of telling you that we shall remain at Deepdale. We shall all have to submit to a great many deprivations.

tions, of course, but I think I can rely upon you and your sisters to endure them with a cheerful spirit. No amount of repining will alter the past; and for that past I am only *partly* responsible.'

Katie was wonderfully touched by her father's altered manner. 'We girls don't care for ourselves so much, dear,' she answered; 'it is for poor little Syd's sake we grieve. It is so hard for him.'

'It is hard for him, very hard,' admitted Mr Chester, and as he spoke of his injured little son, for a moment his voice faltered. 'But I shall do my best to nurse the estates, and repair the wrong that his mother and I have jointly done him. By the way, Katie, has anything been said by her about Chumleigh?'

'She says you are to do as you please in the matter,' replied Katie, with downcast eyes.

'Then that is settled, my dear. And, in my opinion, you might go farther and

fare worse. He made some mention of helping us through you, but if he ever tables the subject to you, you must put your veto upon it. Your mother has never taken the trouble to conceal her sentiments towards him, and he is fully aware of them. He knows well enough that he will owe her toleration only to our altered circumstances. You can see, therefore, my child,' he concluded with dignity, 'that we could not be base enough to accept anything from him.'

'I do see it, father,' she said earnestly, 'and yet I should be so pleased to help you, if I could.'

'Not with Joseph Chumleigh's money,' replied her father firmly. And in this matter Katie felt that he was quite right.

Later on, she held a conference with her sisters upon the domestic revolution.

'It won't last,' said Gertrude, shaking that wise young head of hers. 'It is nothing but a spurt. Papa is a dear old soul personally, but as a public character

he is flashy and frothy. Mamma has depth and persistence. Ever since I obtained to years of observation, I have seen but one ruler at Deepdale. In less than a month she will be in her old position.'

'It doesn't matter much who rules now,' observed Lenore, with a sigh. 'The mischief has been done between them; united or separate, they can't repair it.'

'That goes without saying,' assented Gertrude; adding, with an air of gloomy resolution, 'Katie's future is assured. The only alternative left to you and me is to look out for rich husbands. I shall lay myself out for marriage immediately.'

Observe that Gertrude would be seventeen next month. Her worst enemy could not accuse her of failing to take time by the forelock. When Katie had left them to meditate upon her coming bliss, Gertrude spoke her mind more freely as regards the future.

'I don't see that her marriage will help

us very much. She is a dear girl, and Joseph is a good fellow enough, and I have no doubt that their house will always be open to us. But the country is a poor place for marriageable girls. Joseph is bucolic to the backbone, and will want to stick to his native village till he dies. He will be a breeder of fat oxen and prize sheep till the end of the chapter.'

'I should think they would have a house in town,' suggested Lenore, who was more disposed to look upon the sunny side of things than her sister. 'They won't be able to spend their money if they stick here all their lives, you know.'

'I daresay if Katie makes a point of it, they will go to London for the season. But I don't believe that will help us much. I am alive to all Joseph's good points, but there's no denying the patent fact that he's the last man in the world who could play at fashion. If he had a really clever wife now, like you or me, he might be elevated. But Katie is a trifle humdrum. Depend

upon it, Lenore, they will never succeed in getting any but third-rate people to their house in London, and we don't want to marry third-rate men.'

Lenore was silent. Nobody ever attempted to argue with Gerty. She was the orator of the family, and when the floodgates of her eloquence were fairly loosed, it bore down all opposition in its resistless tide.

'You may do something at Dacre Court,' she resumed presently, in a musing tone. 'Uncle Herbert will surely have the decency to invite some eligible young men.'

Lenore ventured to dissent. 'I don't expect to meet anything superior to a battered old general or admiral.'

'Never mind about his being battered, if he is rich,' replied Gertrude remorselessly. 'Beggars must not be choosers. I would prefer, for your own sake, that you should marry a young man, if there were a choice. But supposing there isn't,

you must take the goods the gods provide you, and be thankful. You have *me* to consider as well as yourself. You must marry so that you can assure *my* future. In such a crisis, it would be scandalous if sisters did not hang together.'

'So it would, dear,' assented Lenore meekly.

'And I must therefore impress upon you most strongly not to suffer yourself to be led away by any romantic or sentimental nonsense,' continued Gertrude severely. 'It has struck me more than once that there is a weak element of romance in your character. Throw it to the winds when you get to Dacre Court. Confine yourself to the practical, and before suffering yourself even to *think* of anybody, ascertain his income, and most especially make sure that he will allow you to spend the season in London. Otherwise I shall die an old maid, and my doom will lie at your door.'





## CHAPTER VI.

### DACRE COURT.

**I**T was 'about the lovely close of a warm summer day,' in the month of August, that Lenore set out on her visit to her uncle, Sir Herbert Dacre, of Dacre Court. She had bidden an affectionate farewell to her family—so affectionate, indeed, that one might have imagined she was taking her departure for some safe place of incarceration. But, of course, there were special reasons why this leave-taking should be tinged with melancholy. She was going to Dacre Court as the representative of a ruined family. When she returned, it

would be for the purpose of assisting in the preparations for Katie's wedding. These, and kindred causes, were responsible for her depression. The Chesters were that rare thing, an united family—I allude only to the girls. They talked about marriage lightly enough, and had been too well brought up by their mamma not to consider it the bounden duty of each and all to settle advantageously in life. But as the time of separation drew nigh, as the dreaded month in which Mr Joseph Chumleigh was to take away their beloved Katie came nearer and nearer, a gentle melancholy began to take possession of the fond souls of Gertrude and Lenore.

But as the train dashed along to its destination, the past and the future gradually gave way to the present in Lenore's thoughts. She speculated on her reception by her uncle, on what sort of greeting would be accorded her by her widowed aunt, and cousins Selina and Gwendolen Partlet.

Intercourse between Dacre Court and Deepdale had never been of a very constant or extensive kind. It was three years since she last saw her uncle, and that was on the occasion of one of his rare visits to his half-sister, Mrs Chester. Her recollections of that period furnished the vision of a little, rather wizened old man, with a chronic expression of bad temper on his unamiable countenance. It was also written in the family chronicles that his visit had been brought to an abrupt and ungracious termination under the following distressing circumstances.

At that time little Sydney was four years old, and being a pretty, vivacious young prattler, managed to worm himself into his uncle's good graces to such an extent that the parents began to harbour expectations of a pecuniary nature. Sir Herbert was a bachelor, a sworn foe to womankind. (His peculiar moroseness was, in fact, attributed to a love disappointment in his youth.) His income was large; his

expenditure, as a rule, so small, that he must be annually putting by a very handsome sum. If he really took a fancy to Sydney, the ultimate benefit to that young gentleman would be great.

Unfortunately, Master Sydney dispelled these pleasant visions by his own rash act. One evening—one fatal evening—he had been kept up in the drawing-room long after his usual hour for retiring. In search of amusement, he pounced upon an album, and, taking it to his uncle, began commenting upon the portraits, for that gentleman's benefit.

As Sir Herbert was not remarkable for the charity of his views, either as regards the world at large or his own particular friends, Sydney's racy criticisms upon the appearance of their mutual acquaintance tickled him immensely for some time. He chuckled with ever-increasing delight over each fresh remark that proved his youthful nephew to be gifted with such pleasant powers of sarcasm. Mrs Chester

regarded the spectacle of the young and the old cynic in such close *rapproch* with unmixed satisfaction, in her secret soul devoutly thanking Heaven for having blessed her with so gifted a son.

But, unhappily, this sort of cleverness, like a too sharp-edged tool, is apt to sometimes cut its owner. Master Sydney, encouraged by his uncle's approbation, waxed wittier and wittier in his observations, until he arrived at a portrait which he had never seen before, it having been put into the album that afternoon. It happened to be one of Sir Herbert himself, but so unlike the original that Sydney utterly failed to detect the likeness.

He paused and peered, and puckered his small brows in the attempt to identify it. The sudden silence roused Mrs Chester's attention. She guessed at once whose portrait it was, and, fearing a *contretemps*, crossed over to the two, in the hope of creating a diversion. Too late! Before she could get half way across the

room, Sydney's flute-like tones rang out in the following question,—

‘Oh, mamma, do come here, and tell me the name of this *very ugly old man*.’

The mischief was done. Sir Herbert tried to chuckle, as if he enjoyed the joke, but the effort was too forced. Mr Chester, who was watching him intently, swore that he turned *green*. The girls averred that his expression reminded them of a picture in the ‘Pilgrim's Progress,’ a picture ‘not altogether unconnected’ with the Enemy of Mankind.

The next day Sir Herbert got up an illness, and by luncheon time had shaken the dust of Deepdale from his feet, leaving young Sydney vaguely aware of having made a mistake somewhere and somehow. Over smartness is sometimes as fatal to one's advancement in life as excessive stupidity.

It is only a very small mind, you will say, that could cherish the memory of a

child's unconscious affront. But then Sir Herbert's mind was as small as spite, envy, and dissatisfaction with his life could make it. In his subsequent correspondence with Mrs Chester he never made the slightest allusion to his luckless nephew. And—significant fact of the strength of his resentment—he shortly after invited his widowed sister with her two daughters to live with him. These ladies had perhaps the stronger claim upon him, since Mrs Chester was only his half-sister, her father having married twice. Intercourse since that period had been very limited. The Partlets had once stayed a week at Deepdale, but Sir Herbert had never deigned to recross the threshold. A formal invitation had once been forwarded to Katie, which, owing to a prior engagement, she had been unable to accept. And quite lately, Sir Herbert had written to Lenore himself a wonderfully polite note, urging her to visit Dacre Court. But knowing their uncle's character, the girls

were uncharitable enough to attribute this sudden affection for a niece, whose very features he must have forgotten, to a desire to vex the Partlets, and make them tremble for the future disposition of his property.

The train came to with a grinding noise at the pretty little station where Lenore was to alight for Dacre Court. A brougham was waiting for her; she and her maid stepped into it, and were rapidly whirled along the high road for about a distance of four miles. They halted for a moment before massive iron gates that swiftly flew open. They went more slowly up the steep drive leading to the terrace. As they proceeded, they caught short glimpses of sunny turf and grand old trees; in the distance they saw a herd of lazy deer crouching in the shade. Then presently the house, a plain old Gothic structure, came into view; and as they drew up at the bottom of the flight of steps, Mrs Partlet and her daughters ap-



peared at the open hall door to welcome their young relative.

Mrs Partlet was a larger and stouter edition of her own mother, with a touch of that mother's supercilious and fine lady-like air. There were also, to Lenore's observant glance, strong indications about her countenance of the hereditary Dacre temper. A long residence with Sir Herbert must, however, she thought, have had a wholesome effect in keeping the display of this unpleasant quality in abeyance.

The Misses Partlet were twins, and wonderfully alike in form and feature. They were ordinary girls, neither bad nor good looking. As one was dark and the other fair, they were easily distinguishable. They were attired in robes of a sombre hue, and their heads were dressed in that somewhat 'tousled' fashion, which proclaimed their connection with the æsthetic school. They had taken to high art to diversify the monotony of their lives. It is to their credit that, condemned as they

were to pass the flower of their youth with Sir Herbert, they had taken to nothing worse.

They all three seemed to be seized with a common impulse of surprise as they welcomed their relative. It was two years ago since they had last seen her at Deepdale. She was then a tall, thin, somewhat gawky girl of sixteen, with only a vague promise of future loveliness. They were not in the least prepared for the radiant beauty that confronted them now. Could two short years have wrought such a change, given such grace and roundness to the form, such delicacy to the features?

The girls felt that they were completely thrown into the shade by this young Hebe. They quaked inwardly as they thought of the impression she was likely to make upon Sir Herbert. For although he professed to hate all women, and handsome women in particular, they had seen his cold eye light up at beauty ere now.

It was not in the nature of things that they could feel excessively well disposed towards so charming a young girl. If she had been plain, ill-mannered, awkward, they would have been prepared to love her and take her to their bosoms. But alas! she was graceful, and bewitching as she was lovely. Her smile was subjugating, in her eyes lay hid a world of magic; her golden hair diffused sunshine. She was far, far too lovely a creature to be presented to a capricious old man who could do what he liked with his money. The Misses Partlet and their mamma felt all this very acutely, but they were powerless to alter the course of events. They could not send her back; they could not lock her up out of sight. All they could do was to dissemble, and protest that they were delighted to see her.

They dissembled with the thoroughness that might be expected of persons of good-breeding. It is only your *parvenus* who show their dislikes plainly. Mrs Partlet

seized upon the girl first, folding her to her ample bosom, and kissing her with a kind of subdued fervour that was a lovely and finished piece of acting. When the elder lady had had her innings, Selina took her turn, and finally handed the victim over to Gwendolen to be finished.

It is no joke to run the gauntlet of three would-be affectionate relatives, who have made up their minds to rather over than under do it. It was some little time before Lenore could regain her composure, so completely had her aunt and cousins kissed the breath out of her.

‘I’m afraid it will be terribly dull for you,’ said Miss Gwendolen, with a sigh. ‘We shall have a few young men down in the course of a week or two, but poor, dear uncle is a terrible wet blanket.’

Then presently, with that admirable good-breeding characteristic of relatives, the Partlets got upon the subject of Lenore’s family misfortunes.

‘Do you think your father has been

in his right senses all these years?' asked Selina, who was distinguished by being the greater talker and having the more 'tousled' head of the two sisters. 'It really is such an unheard-of thing, you know, a man plunging deeper and deeper into debt with his eyes open.'

'Mr. Chester is not alone to blame, perhaps,' suggested Mrs Partlet solemnly, with an air that seemed to intimate she could, if she wished, 'a tale unfold' of her half-sister's extravagance that would speedily set the saddle on the right horse.

'I think we have all been to blame,' said Lenore in a cheerful voice. She did not wish to lay bare her wounds to the Partlet gaze.

'Very sad!' sighed Selina; then more vivaciously, 'And what a dreadful marriage this is for poor Katie! Your mamma has written to us all about this horrid man, Fumleigh or Rumleigh, or whatever his name is.'

'His name is Joseph Chumleigh,' cor-

rected Lenore, with a slight increase of colour on her fair cheek; 'and there is nothing horrid about him. He has the manners and the education of a gentleman; he took his degree at Cambridge. Mamma is prejudiced against him, that's all.'

'Oh, but really, you know, think of his origin,' protested Selina, with a superior smile. On both sides she boasted unblemished lineage, and could in consequence afford to despise others less fortunate in the matter of family. 'His father began life with nothing, I am told. And of course they can't weed that sort of thing out in one generation.'

'What sort of thing?' asked Lenore, feigning obtuseness.

Selina grew vivacious over the interruption. 'Of course you know what I mean. The old man may have done his best for his son, but he can't have made him a gentleman; it will take several genera-

tions to accomplish that. And with regard to this Joseph Chumleigh, depend upon it,' she concluded solemnly, 'sooner or later, *buttons will out*. They're in the blood and bone of the man.'

'I will write to Katie and communicate your dismal forebodings,' said Lenore gravely.

'Don't pay any attention to Selina,' observed Mrs Partlet, who was of more liberal tendencies than her daughter. 'I think Katie has done very well under the circumstances.'

'I suppose you would like to go to your room now,' said Gwendolen, rising. 'And when you are ready, I will take you in to see uncle. You won't find him very amiable; it is one of his bad days.'

So Lenore departed to her room, not however before she caught the warning glance shot by Mrs Partlet at the plain-speaking Gwendolen. When she was alone, she laughed to herself over the incident.

'I can see how dearly they love me

already,' she thought; 'and aunt is afraid I should play the spy and tell tales of them. I hope poverty won't lower my tone as it has done theirs. It must be an awful life, submitting to an old man's caprices for the sake of his money, with the chance that you won't get it after all your waiting.'







## CHAPTER VII.

### A CHARMING RELATIVE.

**A**N hour later, Gwendolen conducted Lenore, according to promise, into the presence of their uncle. Three years had effected a wonderful change for the worse in Sir Herbert's personal appearance. As he sat huddled up in a big easy-chair, a world too wide for his shrunken and wizened form, his feet hardly touching the floor, and the only prominent thing about him being a pair of keen black eyes, he suggested to his irreverent niece the idea of a spiteful little gnome.

He got out of his chair, and when

firmly planted on the ground made an elaborate bow, then extended the tips of his fingers to be shaken. To Lenore this seemed the very funniest greeting that could be exchanged between such near relatives. But knowing Sir Herbert to be a very peculiar man, she was less surprised than one might suppose. Being anxious to accommodate herself to his moods, she executed a stately courtesy in return. On the whole, she was rather grateful that he did not offer to kiss her, as she had half expected; it being an honour that she could well dispense with. In the remote past, she believed, it might have been possible that Sir Herbert Dacre was a kissable person—but she was in the present.

These stately greetings over, he went back to his easy-chair, and motioned his niece to be seated. Gwendolen had already done so without being invited.

‘How did you leave your family?’

asked Sir Herbert presently, breaking a very solemn silence.

Lenore, whose sense of humour was profoundly excited by this peculiar reception, thought that, for the mere fun of the thing, she would answer this question exhaustively.

‘Mamma has got a very bad cold, and papa has a touch of his old complaint, the gout; but Katie, Gerty, and Syd are quite well, I am glad to say.’

Her uncle regarded her curiously as she imparted this information with the utmost gravity. Selina and Gwendolen were rather ‘Yea’ and ‘Nay’ kind of persons in their answers. He was not quite certain whether this new niece was only innocent, or impudent.

‘Syd is your brother, I think,’ he said again. ‘I have a faint recollection of him—a very charming little boy, if I remember rightly.’

Had she smiled or shown the least symptom of covert amusement at this

moment, it would have been all up with her ; but she saw those keen black eyes watching her intently, and she kept her countenance with a valiant effort.

‘ I don’t know that other people consider him charming ; but being the only boy, we think him perfection, as a matter of course,’ she answered in the easiest of voices.

Sir Herbert suddenly fumbled in his pockets, as if in search of something ; and apparently not finding it, addressed Miss Partlet with great politeness.

‘ My dear Gwendolen, may I trouble you to look for my snuff-box.’

‘ Dear Gwendolen ’ got up very slowly. There was a sulky look upon her face, and she walked to the door without answering a word. Lenore thought such conduct on her part somewhat strange. It was not a great service that had been asked of her ; and to do him justice, Sir Herbert’s manner of asking it had been scrupulously polite.

As Miss Partlet was opening the door, he raised his voice for a last injunction,—

‘Don’t run back directly to say you can’t find it. Have a good look, my dear—have a good look; search high and search low.’

The words were simple and natural enough under the circumstances. Miss Partlet might not be a very energetic person in the matter of discovering ‘unconsidered trifles,’ and might require to have her zeal quickened by timely exhortation. But what Lenore could not quite comprehend was the peculiar twinkle that came into her uncle’s eye while he was speaking.

Patience! This mystery shall presently be made clear to her.

When they were alone Sir Herbert leisurely put on his spectacles, and regarded her long and critically, till she grew quite rosy under the process. Then, having made his observations, he as leisurely returned his spectacles to their

case, and proceeded to address her on the subject of her personal appearance.

‘You have improved vastly, my dear, since I last had the pleasure of seeing you.’

‘It is very kind of you to say so, sir,’ murmured Lenore, who had hardly recovered from her confusion.

‘Not at all,’ replied Sir Herbert easily, and with a peculiar chuckle that Lenore observed for the first time. ‘The fact is, my dear, there was considerable room for improvement. Let me see—you were then about fifteen. Shall I try and reproduce my impressions of you at that interesting period?’ he asked pleasantly.

‘If it affords you any amusement, sir,’ she answered, quickly recovering her self-possession under this sudden change of front on his part.

He indulged in another chuckle, and when he chuckled in this fashion, he seemed to Lenore more than ever to resemble a spiteful little gnome.

‘You were very gawky and very shy ; and when anybody out of your own family spoke to you, you had a trick of holding your head down and mumbling out your answer,’ said this cruel delineator of her youth. ‘And whenever I came across you in the grounds, you were invariably munching an apple. You must have had a wonderful digestion.’

‘Can’t you remember anything else to my disadvantage?’ cried Lenore gaily, quite entering into the spirit of the thing.

‘Well, no — not just at the moment,’ answered this curious old gentleman, with a faint ring of regret in his voice. ‘I think you will admit that I was right in saying there was room for improvement, eh?’

‘Certainly, if your flattering portrait is a correct one,’ laughed Lenore.

‘I am a candid critic, my dear, and of course candour generally sounds ill-natured,’ explained this cynical old man.

Lenore thought that if the interview was to be conducted on these lines, it would require wonderful amiability on her part to refrain from giving Sir Herbert as good as he sent. She wished that Gwendolen would make her appearance with the missing snuff-box. As she was secretly giving utterance to this aspiration, Sir Herbert produced the article in question from his pocket and took a pinch.

‘You have found it?’ she cried artlessly. ‘Shall I go and tell Gwendolen? She will be hunting everywhere.’

Her uncle leisurely laid the box on a table beside him, and for some time chuckled quietly to himself, as at an excellent joke.

‘Is he mad, or only vastly delighted at having sent the girl on a fool’s errand?’ was the question that naturally suggested itself to his bewildered niece.

As Lenore’s countenance was a very open one, and a complete index to her thoughts, it is more than probable that he read what was passing in her mind. At



any rate, he condescended to enlighten her as to his singular behaviour.

‘My dear child, you are evidently very innocent, and take things *au pied de la lettre*. Pray, have you never heard of such things as white lies?’

‘Yes, I have,’ she answered slowly, regarding the old gentleman with anything but a look of admiration.

‘Your countenance expresses how terribly I have shocked your moral sense by the question,’ resumed Sir Herbert, with a smile of infinite amusement. ‘I suppose you think it excessively wicked of an old man to tell harmless fibs. I daresay you have already begun to harbour serious doubts as to where I shall ultimately take up my abode when I quit this “terrestrial ball.”’

Lenore was silent. There was something positively ‘uncanny’ about this wizened little old man who chuckled so wickedly and talked so recklessly.

‘The world would be an intolerable

place to live in, my child, if white lies were prohibited. Truth is such a cruel thing. Think of the pain it would give a sensitive person to be always telling it.'

'I have not known you very long, uncle,' said Lenore gravely, 'but I should not imagine it would pain you very much to tell unpalatable truths.'

The little gentleman chuckled so heartily over this retort that she feared he would have a fit.

'You are a wit, I see,' he said, when he had recovered from his hilarity. 'My dear, I was not prepared for this; your mother ought to have apprised me of your powers. Really it is quite refreshing to find that the Dacre family has at length produced a genius, even if it be only a female one. But pray restrain it within proper bounds, lest it too utterly blind us. Do you remember what Moore says,—

"Lesbia hath a wit refined,  
But when its points are gleaming round us,  
Who can tell if they're designed,  
Or to dazzle, or to wound us?"'

Lenore did her best to keep cool under this elegant raillery. She knew well enough that to get out of temper, to show she was hurt by so peculiar a reception, would afford Sir Herbert exquisite pleasure. One resolve she made, that her stay at Dacre Court should be brief.

‘I am glad to find that I afford you so much amusement, sir,’ she said, smiling pleasantly. What a relief it would have been to throw something at him, she thought as she uttered these words in a steady voice.

‘Say interest rather than amusement, my dear,’ corrected Sir Herbert, with a sudden assumption of stately courtesy that made him appear quite a different person. ‘It is a long, a very long time, since Dacre Court has welcomed so charming a visitor. And don’t take any notice of my little peculiarities. I say ill-natured things, I admit; it’s a way I have, and I fear I shall not be cured of it now. My excuse must be that of the poet Rogers—I have

a weak voice, and if I didn't say ill-natured things, people wouldn't hear me.'

Lenore returned no answer to all this, which was apparently meant for an apology. She thought it wise to say as little as possible to such a fantastical creature.

'By the way, I have not yet explained the mystery of the snuff-box,' he resumed, after a brief pause. 'As you see, my nieces reside with me; but, as you will readily understand, there *are* times when I can dispense with their society, charming as it is. Now, it would be the height of ill-breeding to say to such sweet, amiable girls, whose only fault is a too great affection for their uncle'—a faint chuckle here—'it would, I repeat, be the acme of rudeness to say, "I don't want you any longer; I wish to be alone." Don't you agree with me?'

'It would not be polite, certainly,' assented Lenore.

'I thought you would see it. So, to get over this difficulty, I have invented a

little fiction,—I ask them to look for my snuff-box. At first they took it seriously, as you did; and I am afraid,' he added, with a wicked twinkle, 'that the poor dear girls tired themselves terribly in their exertions to find it. But now they know what I mean and *don't look*. Don't make yourself in the least uneasy about Gwendolen. She is perfectly comfortable, and will return after a reasonable interval, without making any allusion to the snuff-box, which, by long experience, she knows to be in my possession.'

'I am much obliged to you for the explanation,' said Lenore gravely.

'You are perfectly welcome. And, although I am not a particularly vain man,' he observed, with a faint ring of elation in his thin, piping tones, 'I *do* feel just a trifle proud of that invention. There is an elegance, a diplomatic aroma about it. When one passes one's life with the same people, intercourse is rendered so much smoother by a set of polite

fictions of the kind. It pains me to tell anybody pointedly that he is a boor, or a fool, or in the way.'

'Would you like me to fetch your snuff-box now?' she asked, laughing, and half rising from her seat.

'No, my dear; I am by no means tired of you yet,' he answered in a voice that was quite kind. 'And I must also congratulate you on the good grace with which you have submitted to my *badinage*. I suppose you have some sense of humour; I regret to say both your cousins are destitute of that priceless endowment. I daresay you observed with what a sulky air Gwendolen left the room. In her place, you would have laughed.'

'I'm not so sure of that,' replied Lenore promptly. She had not taken any very great fancy to the young ladies, but the sole fact of being condemned to live under the same roof with Sir Herbert entitled them to a vast pity at her hands.

Sir Herbert read her like a book. 'It

is a sad lot for them, my dear, isn't it? How would you like to come and take up your permanent residence with me?'

Had her life been depending on it, she could not have held back the saucy answer that rose spontaneously to her lips. 'I've hardly known you long enough to give a decided opinion on the subject, but I think I should very often require a change.'

Strange to say, her frankness did not seem to offend him in the least. He laughed quite pleasantly over it—for him. Perhaps such candour was refreshing in contrast to the Partlet subserviency.

'They'll marry some day, I suppose. And then'—there was a very slight chuckle here—'instead of being an old man's darlings, they will be young men's slaves.'

Further confidential discourse was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of the long absent Gwendolen. She verified her uncle's predictions by totally ignoring the subject of the snuff-box and addressing herself to Lenore.

‘If your interview is quite finished, it is about time to think of dressing for dinner.’

Lenore rose, very glad of the interruption, and prepared to follow her. Sir Herbert rose also, and waved his hand to them with quite a friendly air.

‘We shall meet at Philippi, that is to say, the dinner-table,’ he cried gaily. ‘I have enjoyed our *tête-à-tête* vastly. Your humour, your high spirits, and, above all, your frankness, have made a most agreeable impression upon me.’ (For the life of her, Lenore could not tell whether he was speaking seriously, or merely indulging in solemn chaff.) ‘I have only one little favour to ask of you. Do not be too prodigal of your wit, just at first. I lead such a dull life, and am so unaccustomed to anything like humour or brilliance in my ordinary associates, that the consequences to a man in my delicate state of health might be extremely disastrous. *Au revoir.*’



And with this ingenious speech, which accomplished the difficult feat—almost impossible to a less agile and practised intellect—of paying a compliment to one girl at the expense of the other, he dismissed them.

‘He is a sweet thing in uncles, is he not?’ asked Miss Partlet, when they were safely beyond earshot, her anger getting the better of her prudence.

‘Very,’ assented Lenore drily. ‘I had no idea I possessed so charming a relative. If I could have formed the faintest notion of what he was like, I should not have waited for an invitation—I should have flown to him long ago on the wings of love.’

Gwendolen regarded her with a more friendly air after this answer. ‘Don’t you think it will be best for us to be quite frank with each other?’ she asked.

‘I have no desire to be anything else,’ answered the other heartily. And the cordiality of her tone stimulated her cousin to further discourse.

‘Well, of course nobody comes here except in their own interests. That is perfectly understood. And I don’t know that I can blame you for trying to get your share.’

‘You are really jumping at conclusions a little too fast,’ said Lenore, half annoyed and half amused. ‘I have no designs on Uncle Dacre.’

‘Then what in the world did you come here for?’ asked Gwendolen suspiciously.

‘I hardly know. I think I came principally because I was invited. Blood is thicker than water.’

‘So they say. For my own part, I prefer water to some blood,’ said Miss Partlet solemnly. ‘I can tell you I am heartily tired of it; if mamma and Selina were of my mind, we shouldn’t be here long. You have heard a specimen of the way in which he insults us. Not a day passes without plenty of the same thing.’

As Gwendolen was so frank, Lenore thought she would be frank too. ‘I sup-

pose he knows you only live with him for the sake of his money.'

'I suppose he does, but he must leave his money to somebody; he can't take it with him. It would be just as easy to be civil over it.'

'I have seen enough of him to guess what an awful life you must lead,' said Lenore sympathisingly.

'You are right. If we didn't have the occasional relief of abusing him roundly among ourselves, I believe we should go mad. Of course, he is more odious at some times than others. May I tell mamma and Selina that we needn't play the hypocrite before you?' asked Miss Partlet finally.

'By all means,' cried Lenore, laughing. 'Whenever you feel disposed to give full vent to your ideas upon the subject, kindly consider me as non-existent.'

'And for my part, I sha'n't grudge you a reasonable share. But it is only right that we should wish to keep out interlopers. Whatever he leaves us, we shall have earned

very hardly. I know three languages tolerably well, but in none of them can I find adjectives sufficiently expressive for him.'

'If I had to describe him, I should invent my own epithets,' cried Lenore merrily. 'And I should say he was the *awfullest*, the *spitefullest*, the *maliciousest* old man I've ever seen or heard or read of.'

But she felt quite remorseful when she observed how hard he tried, for the rest of the day, to subdue or hide his normal characteristics for her benefit. At the dinner-table he smiled and joked, and led conversation, and exerted himself to play the agreeable host with such praiseworthy perseverance, that once or twice she told herself she must have misjudged him. Might it not be just possible that he was a man of infinite humour, and that it was the dulness of his companions which prevented them from appreciating his sallies? But ever and anon, a harsh inflection of the voice, a malicious twinkle of the piercing eye,

served to dispel this charitable hypothesis of which she was the sole inventor.

One thing was very certain—he was evidently trotting out his company manners, which had lain somewhat rusty from long want of usage. When they adjourned to the drawing-room, he still maintained the flow of vivacity which had so astonished her. He led her on to talk unreservedly, and listened to her chatter with an air of benevolent attention that was flattering in the extreme to the object of it—and proportionately unflattering to the other members of the party, inasmuch as it served to heighten by the contrast his usual disrespectful treatment of themselves.

He pressed her to sing, which she did. She had a fresh, tuneful voice, and good taste, still there was nothing in her performance to excite raptures in the ordinary listener. But he held his head on one side, and followed her notes with the absorbed air of a man who was drinking in delight of a peculiarly novel and ecstatic nature.

‘Charming, charming!’ he exclaimed enthusiastically, when she had finished. ‘My dear child, you have no idea what pleasure you have given me. What an exquisite gift! What a source of delight you must be in your own home circle!’

Lenore rather opened her eyes at this lavish style of praise. She sung occasionally at home, but had not acquired any very great fame amongst her own family. Was he solemnly chaffing her? No; she had seen enough of him already to know that his badinage was accompanied, preceded, or followed by a peculiar, low chuckle. Later on she discovered the key to the mystery. Neither Selina nor Gwendolen could sing a note. Hence the fervour of his compliments to herself, as pointing a stronger moral against them.

This excessive assumption of amiability no doubt began to tell upon his system, for he retired a full hour earlier than his usual time for seeking that repose which his good deeds during the day should so fairly

have earned him. He begged Lenore to pardon his early withdrawal from the family circle, alleging for excuse his infirmities, and departed, beaming—having kept up the farce to the last.

‘Aren’t you overwhelmed with your reception?’ inquired Selina sarcastically, when he was safely out of earshot.

‘Completely,’ she said, laughing. ‘It so far exceeds my own sense of my merits, that I feel quite in a whirl. He must have forgotten I was so nearly connected with him. Do you think he is going to keep it up all the time I stop here?’

‘I can’t say,’ answered Selina, shaking her head. ‘It would seem almost an impossible thing for him to do. But if he was quite convinced that it would especially annoy Gwen and myself, I think he would be capable of the self-denial such a protracted spell of politeness would entail.’

‘He was so agreeable at dinner, you know, that I began to think I had judged

him too harshly,' observed Lenore innocently.

Selina regarded her fixedly for a moment, then she asked in a solemn voice, — 'You've heard him chuckle?'

Lenore nodded to intimate that she had enjoyed that pleasure.

'Then just tell me this,' continued her cousin, more solemnly still, 'do you believe that a man who can chuckle in that unearthly, blood-curdling fashion has got a spark of goodness in him?'







## CHAPTER VIII.

### CONFIDENCES.

**S**AUNTERING by herself, on the following morning, through the extensive grounds of Dacre Court, Lenore found much food for reflection. In the first place, she had had no idea that Sir Herbert was so rich, and the contrast between this luxurious home and the ruined one she had just quitted filled her with a feeling of sadness. No wonder that the Partlets stayed on and submitted daily to contumely and insult. The stake for which they were playing was such an uncommonly high one. For the last thirty years, according to what Gwendolen had told her last night,

her uncle had annually put by several thousand pounds out of his income. He saw little society, kept up a small establishment, and lived as frugally as a man in his position could live; so that in his case saving was a very easy matter.

And yet when Lenore compared his lot with that of her own father, she was not so sure that the advantage lay all on his side. Mr Chester was by no means a model citizen. Criminally weak and indolently selfish, he had allowed his foolish fear of a tyrannical wife to sway him to a course of action fatal to the interests of his children. And yet, so far as the *man* went, there was not one of his friends or acquaintance who would not have a good word to say in his favour. Geniality, generosity, good temper—these were the qualities which made those who had been most wronged by him ready to forgive him.

If Algernon Chester were to die to-morrow, every one of his children would shed heartfelt tears. When Sir Herbert

Dacre died, would a soul grieve? The Misses Partlet might put their handkerchiefs to their eyes for the sake of appearances, but their hearts would be beating wildly with gratitude for deliverance from an odious slavery.

‘He certainly must know how hateful he makes himself,’ mused Lenore. ‘He cannot think they do not bitterly resent the gibes and sneers he lavishes upon them.’

Perhaps he did, perhaps he did not. As far as my own personal experience has gone, cantankerous people are blissfully endowed with an utter ignorance of their own demerits, and are ready to credit those around them with the possession of their own disagreeable qualities. It is their poor victims who are selfish, boorish, sour-tempered, hateful in disposition—not themselves.

Lenore was interrupted in the midst of these judicious reflections by the arrival of Selina, who had joined her in order to impart an interesting piece of news.

‘Sir Timothy Jinks is coming to-morrow. Have you ever met him?’ she asked.

Lenore intimated that she had not enjoyed that honour, and proceeded to institute some natural inquiries on the subject of the gentleman in question.

‘No, he is not good-looking, but so affable and pleasant-mannered that one quite forgets it,’ replied Selina promptly. ‘We have known him since he was a little boy; mother and the late Lady Jinks were bosom friends, you know. He is a very frequent visitor here; as far as uncle can like anybody, he likes him, although he chaffs and is excessively rude to him at times. But that, of course, goes without saying.’

‘Sir Timothy puts up with the rudeness, I suppose, for the sake of enjoying your society?’

‘Something of that sort, I daresay,’ answered Selina, laughing. After pausing a moment or two, she added, in a

confidential tone,—‘ Now, I am going to let you into a little secret. I am sure I can trust you.’

‘ Don’t be too sure. You certainly cannot know much of my character in four-and-twenty hours.’

‘ Oh, it doesn’t take me long to get to the bottom of people,’ replied Miss Selina with a knowing air. ‘ I am going to talk to you about Sir Timothy. The fact is, he and Gwendolen are very fond of each other.’

‘ Oh!’ said Lenore, beginning to get interested, although she wondered how such a sweet-smelling flower as love could blossom in the cold, chilling atmosphere of Dacre Court. ‘ Is it really a case? Are they engaged?’

‘ N—o,’ replied Selina in a less assured tone. ‘ They have not got quite so far as that. Sir Timothy is rather a procrastinating sort of man; and Gwendolen is just a little bit of a flirt.’

‘ Dear me!’ was Lenore’s involuntary

remark at this astounding information, Gwendolen being the last young woman in the world whom she should have set down as a coquette.

‘But the symptoms cannot be mistaken,’ pursued Selina, as if she were speaking of an attack of measles or the scarlet fever. ‘I am fully persuaded that matters will be arranged very shortly—in this very visit, probably.’

‘I trust they may be, if the thing is for Gwendolen’s happiness. Is Sir Timothy rich?’

‘Not rich, perhaps, but fairly well off.’

They walked on together for a little time in silence. Then Miss Selina came to the real point of her discourse.

‘Now, I want to ask you a favour; I am sure you are very good-natured. Will you help me to give Sir Timothy and Gwen opportunities? Will you—I really hardly know how to put it, it is so embarrassing.’

‘Let me put it for you,’ said Lenore

good-humouredly. 'Will I utterly efface myself, and keep this young man at an immense distance? Yes, I will.'

'Oh, how charming of you to understand me so readily!' cried Miss Selina rapturously. 'I am *so* fond of dear Gwen, and to see her happily married would be the sweetest, the very sweetest moment of my life.'

So this little bargain was sealed, and Lenore's good-nature in the matter quite won Selina's heart. But Lenore had her doubts of Sir Timothy's intentions, all the same. He could not be a very ardent lover, or he would have proposed long ago. And their anxiety that she should keep out of his way went far to prove that the baronet was not of a very stable disposition. Poor Gwendolen! Between a wavering suitor and an irascible uncle, her position was not enviable.

In the course of the afternoon Gwendolen asked her cousin to come into the grounds for a stroll, with an air that was

friendly, not to say affectionate. As it was a very hot day, and exercise was fatiguing, she proposed that they should recline under the shadow of a tall oak and converse at their leisure—which they did.

‘Sir Timothy Jinks is coming to-morrow,’ she said, when they had seated themselves comfortably on their grassy couch.

‘So Selina has already told me,’ observed Lenore.

‘Oh, I did not know that. Did she also tell you that Keith Luttrell would be down next Monday?’

‘No; that is quite news. Who is Keith Luttrell?’

‘Oh, a very delightful fellow. Most people call him handsome; and he is altogether unexceptionable. Unfortunately, he is poor; only a younger son, you know. An aunt left him about a thousand a-year, and that’s all he has.’

‘I have heard of many younger sons who are worse off,’ said Lenore gravely.



'I daresay. I do so wish he were rich, poor fellow.'

'Why?' inquired Lenore curiously. It seemed to her that this wish was not very flattering to Sir Timothy Jinks.

'I think I will entrust you with a little secret,' said Gwendolen presently, in a very confidential tone. It occurred to Lenore that she was in for secrets to-day. 'Keith Luttrell is very attached to Selina.'

'Oh!' said the other shortly. 'Does Selina reciprocate the attachment, may I be allowed to ask?'

'Between ourselves, I believe she does. But Selina is a reserved girl, and rather cold. I fear she has snubbed poor Luttrell a good deal; and men take that kind of thing to heart.'

Lenore kept silence under this explanation—although it certainly *did* strike her that there appeared to be a kick in the gallop of both the admirers of the Misses Partlet.

'Now, I am going to ask you a little

favour,' resumed the friendly Gwendolen. 'Of course, it is not a good match from a worldly point of view, but, in strict confidence, I believe it is one that would make my darling Selina very happy. What I want to ask you is this—will you help me to throw them together as much as possible? I think if we really gave them a good opportunity, matters would speedily come to an issue.'

Had Gwendolen not been regarding her so gravely and anxiously, Lenore would have liked to indulge in a hearty fit of laughter. It was altogether too touching, the interest these two girls took in each other's love affairs.

'I will do my best to help you and your sister,' she answered at length, with great earnestness; 'and I won't get up the ghost of a flirtation with Mr Luttrell myself.'

'Oh, you darling!' cried Gwendolen enthusiastically, and forthwith enfolded her relative in an affectionate embrace.

‘And now I will tell you something in return,’ said Lenore, when this performance was over. ‘Selina this morning made a similar request to me on behalf of you and Sir Timothy Jinks.’

‘Oh, the sly thing!’ ejaculated the younger Miss Partlet, with a sweet blush.

‘It seems to me,’ remarked Lenore, rather cruelly, ‘that you two girls go about doing each other good by stealth, and when you’re found out, blush to find it fame.’

Gwendolen coloured a deeper red. She was not gifted with a superabundant amount of humour, but she could not fail to see the absurdity of the present situation.

Lenore took pity on the girl’s evident confusion. ‘But all the same, it is to your credit; I like to see affection in families. I would do anything for my own family.’

‘I am quite sure you would,’ murmured

the other, trying to propitiate her by flattery.

‘Still, there are a few observations I should like to make to you. I am to steer clear of Sir Timothy for your sake ; I am to get out of Mr Luttrell’s way for Selina’s sake. Has it ever occurred to either of you that my position will not be a lively one ? You see, there doesn’t seem to be anybody provided for ME.’

‘Oh, my dear, do you fancy for a moment we would treat you so shabbily ?’ cried Gwendolen, in a voice of acute reproach. ‘You *must* think badly of us. No, indeed. We have got a delightful little surprise in store for you.’

‘Oh ! That, of course, alters the complexion of affairs at once,’ said Lenore, feeling rather more favourably disposed to these two young ladies. ‘I hope the gentleman you’ve procured for my especial benefit is at least equal to the average.’

‘Oh, my dear, Dacre Court isn’t so far

from Deepdale that we don't know what our friends are doing,' replied Gwendolen, with remarkable vivacity. 'We hear a great deal more than you think, although we *are* shut up from "morn till dewy eve" with a cantankerous old man. We have invited—whom do you think?'

Her cousin's playfulness rather irritated Lenore. 'Oh, do drop mystery, Gwendolen, and let me know the worst at once.'

'The worst indeed!' cried Gwendolen, with an arch toss of her head that must have been originally invented for the subjugation of Sir Timothy Jinks. 'What should you say if I told you that ROBERT FARQUHAR were coming here next week?'

Unfortunately for the success of this 'delightful surprise,' Lenore testified no pleasure therein. She flushed angrily, and spoke in a cold voice. 'I shall not be at all pleased to see Mr Farquhar; and if you have only asked him on my account, I must tell you frankly you have made a great mistake.'

Poor Gwendolen wore a very crestfallen air. 'Why, I understood — everybody thinks that—'

'Who is everybody, Gwendolen?' asked Lenore sternly. The other was silent. 'I suppose you have heard this from some foolish, gossipy old woman, and taken it as gospel. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, between me and Mr Farquhar. We are very good friends, and that is all.'

'Then, if you are good friends, why do you object to meet him?' cried Gwendolen swiftly.

It was now Lenore's turn to look a little guilty. 'Because—because he has made a slight mistake with regard to our relations, and it is better that we should not meet for some little time.'

'Oh, then there was smoke, if not fire,' said Gwendolen easily. 'Well, I'm sorry we made the mistake, but we really thought we were doing you a kindness.'

'Does he know I shall be here?'

'No. *That*,' observed Gwendolen with

considerable emphasis, 'was to be a pleasant surprise for *him*.'

Lenore was silent for a few moments. The interval helped her to recover her temper, and to perceive that she had been rather sharp with her relative. After all, the girls fancied they were doing it for the best, and who can do more than her best?

'I'm much obliged to you for your kind intentions, Gwen,' she said in a more gracious tone, 'but in the future take my advice, and don't plan surprises for people until you are quite sure that they are likely to be acceptable. And, above all, don't jump to the conclusion that because a young man and a young woman have been friends from childhood, that they must of necessity be lovers.'

Gwendolen coloured and looked rather foolish at these frank remarks. They certainly did hit hard at her own expectations with regard to Sir Timothy.

'Are we to have no other visitors but young men?' asked Lenore presently.

‘I don’t expect we shall. Uncle says he detests middle-aged and elderly people. I suppose the real reason for that is, he feels he must be comparatively civil to *them*, whereas he can be as rude as he likes to his juniors. His age gives him privileges, you see.’

‘Privileges of which he is not slow to avail himself, I should say,’ cried Lenore, laughing.

Later on, as she was dressing for dinner, she meditated over what had passed between herself and her two cousins. She could not but feel intensely amused at the way in which they had warned her of their own particular preserves. She also harboured considerable doubts as to whether Mr Luttrell and Sir Timothy were quite as much in earnest as Gwen-dolen and Selina had led her to believe. She wrote a long letter home to Katie that night, in which she fully informed her sister of the state of affairs, and concluded with the following sentences:—‘You see



they have taken great precautions to label and pair us off very neatly, but I have a presentiment that we shall get mixed up somehow.'

And time verified her presentiment. They did get mixed up, with a vengeance.





## CHAPTER IX.

### AN ELIGIBLE YOUNG MAN.

**T**HE morrow arrives, and brings with it in due course Sir Timothy Jinks. Aid me, O Muse, to describe this young gentleman! A broad, fat, good-natured face devoid of any particular expression. A rather large mouth, ornamented by a small, pale moustache. Light, somewhat colourless eyes that, on a searching examination, turn out to be blue. Sandy hair, parted down the centre, and brushed flat to the head. A well-proportioned figure, slightly above the middle height. Garments of the peculiar cut and tightness known as 'horsey.'

Such was the portrait of Sir Timothy

Jinks, Bart. A jollier, a more good-tempered young fellow never breathed. But, on the whole, Lenore felt no desire to rob Gwendolen of her lover, if indeed he was her lover. Nothing in his greeting to the supposed object of his affections suggested the existence of an ardent attachment. But then Sir Timothy might not belong to that class of men who wear their hearts upon their sleeves.

Be this as it may, one fact was indisputable. His not very expressive eyes, which had given nothing but friendly glances to his old friends, lighted up with admiration as they rested on the animated loveliness of Lenore. 'A beautiful woman,' says a great writer, 'is a picture that drives all beholders nobly mad.' The beautiful girl he beheld for the first time was a picture which had the effect of making Sir Timothy's heart beat quicker than it had done for a long while. It did more, much more; it stimulated him to the production of a compliment.

‘I have heard of you very often, of course,’ he said, blushing—yes, positively blushing under the gaze of those radiant orbs; ‘but really I had no idea, you know, that I should meet so charming a young lady.’

‘Don’t go in for compliments,’ cried Gwendolen, with a laugh in which there was very little mirth. ‘You are the worst hand at them I ever met. You haven’t sufficient originality. I daresay my cousin is laughing in her sleeve now at the awkwardness of your attempt.’

But Sir Timothy was not to be diverted from his worship of beauty by Gwendolen’s acrid remarks. He got over his first confusion, and pulled himself together a bit. Why should he be sheepish before a pretty girl? Had he not reached the mature age of twenty-five, and enjoyed a wide experience of life?

‘No; really, now, Miss Chester, you wouldn’t be so cruel as that, I am sure,’ he protested, putting on his best man-of-

the-world air. 'You would take the will for the deed, wouldn't you?'

'In most things, but not in compliments,' replied Lenore smartly.

She had promised not to encourage this young man, and inclination went hand-in-hand with her promise. Gwendolen was quite welcome to him, so far as she was concerned. Far, far different from Sir Timothy Jinks must be the man to whom she would give her virgin heart. But, for her own satisfaction, she determined that she would sound him at the first opportunity on the subject of Gwendolen, in order to discover if there were any foundation for the expectations of that sanguine maiden.

But although Sir Timothy was not her *beau idéal* of a lover, she was obliged to confess, when she knew him better, that he was a most welcome addition to their small circle. His loquacity, his cheerfulness, his high spirits, his evident desire to make himself agreeable and contribute to

their amusement, entitled him to her admiration and esteem. Even Sir Herbert, although he chaffed him unmercifully, liked the young fellow.

‘Jinks is positively one of the best young men I know,’ he condescended to inform Lenore when they were all in the drawing-room on the evening succeeding his arrival.

As he delivered this encomium in a high key, it was heard by everybody, including the baronet, who rose and made a solemn bow to his host.

‘You make me proud, Sir Herbert ; ’pon my honour, you do. I always knew you were fond of young people, but I hadn’t an idea you thought so highly of me.’

‘Yes, I *am* fond of young people,’ said the old gentleman, glancing from one to the other in turn as he spoke. ‘Youth is so fresh, so ingenuous, so disinterested, so totally unconscious of self. When I am in the company of the young, I think to myself,—Here is no deceit, no guile,

no flattery, no selfishness. And those reflections to a man of my age are very comforting.'

Here the old hypocrite assumed an air of profound satisfaction.

'I suppose you were all that when you were a youth, uncle ?' asked Lenore pertly.

'Yes, my dear, all that, and a great deal more,' replied the ancient sinner, with perfect gravity.

'I should have liked to have known you then,' observed Lenore, looking up at him with one of her sauciest smiles. And for a moment the fresh, radiant loveliness of her fair young face caused even his grim features to relax.

'You're an impudent young minx,' he said in a voice that was almost playful ; 'and if you were my daughter, I would feed you on bread and water for a fortnight.'

A silence succeeded this ; and then Sir Herbert set the ball of conversation rolling again,—

‘Let us return to our muttons—that is to say, Jinks; not that I mean to insinuate there is anything sheepish about him. Jinks is a very loquacious person, now, Lenore; but loquacity has not always been his distinguishing characteristic. Jinks, my boy, tell us that story about you and Mrs Hogg.’

But Sir Timothy begged to be excused.

‘Happy to oblige you, I’m sure, sir; but it would sound so much better if *you* were to tell it. I don’t know a man who can tell an uncomplimentary story of another man so well as you can. You bring out the point with such gusto.’

‘He, he!’ chuckled the old gentleman. ‘You flatter me, Jinks—you do really. Well, since you insist, I will tell this particular story for my niece’s benefit.’

He gave a prefatory cough to secure attention. His very eyes seemed to twinkle with enjoyment at the prospect of so congenial a task as that of exposing the folly of a fellow-mortal. There was



a richness, a fulness, a roundness in his usually weak tones as he told the tale.

‘At the age of sixteen our friend Jinks’ progress in his studies had been so unsatisfactory that the head-master of his school declined the honour of further attempting to instruct him. So he was sent to a tutor named Hogg, a gentleman warranted to get knowledge into the densest heads by some mechanical or surgical process of which he alone possessed the secret.’

‘Bravo!’ interrupted Sir Timothy at this point, with charming good-humour. ‘I can see you are in excellent form to-night, sir.’

‘I wish I had time to tell you of the superhuman efforts made by Hogg to bring up our friend to the not very lofty standard of proficiency attained by the average English youth,’ resumed Sir Herbert, with a beaming smile. ‘But I must pass over these in silence. This tutor had a wife and two daughters, accomplished and charming young ladies, I believe. It

was the custom of the establishment for the lads to spend an hour or two every evening in the drawing-room, and engage in conversation with these charmers. Our friend Jinks followed the first half of the custom, but not the second, — that is to say, he honoured them with his society, but he never opened his mouth. As a matter of fact, I believe he sat in the same corner every night and twiddled his thumbs.'

'No, by Jove, I didn't!' cried the baronet at this barefaced embellishment of the original story. 'Your imagination has run away with you, sir. I used to go steadily through the family album and back again.'

'I stand corrected. Well, the Misses Hogg and his fellow-pupils failed to recognise the beauty of the axiom that speech is silver and silence golden. After they had stood it for three months, Jinks got so dreadfully chaffed that his life became a burden to him. . It was then that he resolved to turn over a new leaf, rub up his

conversational powers, and astonish his friends by his long-concealed brilliance and wit. The rumour went round that on a certain evening Jinks would give them a taste of his quality that would make them open their eyes. The eventful evening came; curiosity was at its height; everybody was in a state of excitement. Suddenly there was a dead silence. Every eye was turned upon Jinks; for he had previously announced his intention of taking the first opportunity that presented itself. Jinks' courage did not fail him. He got up solemnly from his chair, crossed over to where the eldest Miss Hogg was seated, planted himself before her, and roared out in a voice like a boatswain's,—

“I say, Miss Hogg, I once knew a lady who had a little dog.”

Here Sir Herbert paused to take breath. Lenore, her eyes running over with tears of laughter, asked anxiously,—

‘But that isn't all, surely?’

‘That’s all that Jinks was allowed to get out. Whether it was the sudden breaking of the long silence, or his stentorian tones, or the formality of his proceedings, I can’t say ; but he was interrupted by an explosion of mirth that sent him back to his corner a sadder and a wiser youth. He never opened his lips again in Hogg’s drawing-room.’

‘Never,’ confirmed Sir Timothy ; ‘and I’m sorry I ever said as much as I did.’

‘Your reception was certainly not encouraging,’ observed Lenore, when she had recovered her gravity.

‘And now, you see, he has gone to the other extreme,’ added the old gentleman, with one of those beaming smiles of his that generally heralded something rude. ‘He is one of the most loquacious creatures breathing, never happy unless he is “always talking.” Although I cannot go so far as to say that the quality of his discourse bears any relation to the quantity.’

The young man received this thrust

with the most unruffled air in the world. 'I am sure we are all obliged to you for telling the story so well, sir. I think you managed to emphasise every point that told against me. I can't give you higher praise.'

And indeed the story-teller appeared to be highly pleased with this tribute to his powers, for he chuckled to himself so long and heartily that Lenore began to fear he would injure his health by such excessive mirth.

'He is not used to it, you know,' she whispered aside to Gwendolen. 'I am sure he will be ill to-morrow. Sir Timothy ought not to flatter him on his weak side like that.'

The next day's post brought Lenore a letter from Gertrude, who took the office of special correspondent in place of Katie, busily engaged on 'urgent private affairs.' From the tone of her epistle it was but too evident that the family misfortunes had exercised an unfavourable influence on the

morals of this enterprising young person, and developed unscrupulous tendencies.

‘Katie and Joseph Chumleigh have no time for anything but spooning,’ she wrote. ‘Their conduct is perfectly sickening. I hope when *my* time comes I shall not make such an idiot of myself. Things are working more smoothly here, in a domestic sense. Mother seems to be coming round, and is planning a scheme of future economies with the governor. The outlook is most dismal. For an indefinite period there are to be no more balls, no more seasons in town ; in fact, to put it emphatically, no more *nothing*. Do try your best to catch the *richest* of the two young men who are coming to the Court, so that you can be married quickly and have me to live with you. Positively I don’t see any other chance for us. Heaps of love from all, including your affectionate sister, GERTY. P.S.—Write soon and let me know what the young men are like.



## CHAPTER X.

### AN UNCONVENTIONAL MEETING.

**T**HE day fixed for Mr Luttrell's arrival had at length dawned, and Lenore welcomed it with unfeigned pleasure. Sir Timothy Jinks was a most agreeable young man, and he had spared no pains to amuse the three young ladies who had been compelled to look to him for entertainment. But three whole evenings of Sir Timothy had induced her to look forward with rapture to a diversion in the shape of some other young man.

The baronet had told all his best stories and cracked all his best jokes. He had

candidly confessed that he was 'pumped out,' and would have to tell them all over again if nobody arrived to relieve him. Do not let us be severe upon Sir Timothy, nor hastily rush to the conclusion that he was deficient in originality. When we remember what a very small volume would hold the really good things of such transcendent wits as Sheridan and Sydney Smith, do not let us be hard upon a not particularly brilliant young baronet.

Mr Luttrell was expected any time between lunch and dinner. Selina was in a state of pleasurable excitement that revealed itself in the sparkle of her eyes, in her excessive amiability, and her general air of restlessness. Lenore noted these symptoms with the keenness of observation that belongs to her sex, and set down the following as an established fact: whatever might be the nature of Mr Luttrell's sentiments towards Miss Partlet, there could be no doubt that Miss Partlet was in love with Mr Luttrell.



In the afternoon she took a book, and, slipping quietly out of the house, walked rapidly away to a secluded spot, where she could have an hour or two to herself. She had had enough of feminine talk with her cousins; she had had enough, for the present at least, of the society of Sir Timothy. She would make a couch under the friendly shade of the thick-leaved trees, and read her book in peace.

The afternoon was a glorious one. The sun was shining brightly and fiercely; now and again a tiny cloudlet came sailing in his direction, but melted away before it could reach him. There was an intense languor in the heavy, hot air, and everything in nature seemed to succumb to its influence. The birds twittered intermittently, as if the exertion of continuous song were too great. The butterflies flitted about with only half their usual spirit. Even the tireless bees were attending to their business in a very perfunctory fashion. The

heat, the languor, the silence all invited to repose.

And presently, when Lenore had waded through about a dozen pages of a not very interesting novel, she began to feel an insidious drowsiness creeping over her. The book quivered in her hand, and brought her back to herself with a start. She turned over a fresh page manfully, and did her best to keep her sleepy eyes wide open. But Morpheus was too strong for her. By slow degrees the book leaned, quivered, and slid from her nerveless fingers to the grass below. Her head fell back against the trunk of the tree behind her. The heavy lids dropped down over the tired eyes. She was asleep.

It is not every sleeping woman who makes a pretty picture, especially when the slumber is accompanied by those deep sounds which sooner or later culminate into—what shall we say?—breathing with unusual vehemence. But Lenore was one of the exceptions; and I can say, with-

out fear of contradiction, that she made a charming picture. If an artist had wanted to typify repose, I don't think he could have taken a better subject than would have been offered him here, under the shade of the thick-leaved oak at whose hoary foot she was reclining.

She lay as still as the enchanted princess who waited for her lover's kiss to wake her back to life. The rosy lips were ever so slightly parted, just giving the faintest glimpse of teeth like pearls. A soft, warm flush—the roseate flush of slumber—mantled the sweetly-rounded cheek. Her quiet breathing hardly lifted the snowy muslin dress. One arm and hand were wreathed gracefully round the sunny, golden head.

She lay so still that the other inhabitants of this solitude felt emboldened to take liberties with her. Butterflies paused in their flight to peep wonderingly 'at her. An investigating little bird or two hopped up quite close to her, and no doubt specu-

lated as to what manner of creature she could be. Wandering sunbeams, that had somehow lost their way amongst the heavy and bewildering foliage of the trees, found her out, and executed a kind of trembling dance over her face and figure and golden head. She must have been dreaming happy dreams, for ever and again a soft smile played around the corner of the rosy, parted lips. A stranger who beheld her would have said that she must be dreaming of her lover. But we know that she had no lover to dream about, at least no lover that she cared for. It could not be that she was dreaming of Lieutenant Robert Farquhar. Much more likely that she was smiling in her sleep at one of Sir Timothy's jokes.

A sudden start, a hasty opening of the eyes, a violent rubbing of the same to assure herself that she was wide awake, and Lenore scrambled to her feet, a picture of the most vivid and painful confusion. For there, a few yards in front of

her, gazing at her with eyes out of which the admiration had not yet died out, stood—a man.

Confused as she was, and only half awake, she knew who it was at once. If this were not the original of the *carte de visite* that she had seen in Selina's album, she would never more trust to her judgment. The lithe, muscular figure, the laughing blue eyes, the curly brown hair, the glossy, luxuriant beard—it must either be Keith Luttrell, or Keith Luttrell's ghost.

The stranger did not appear in the least embarrassed. His expression was one of amusement, tempered with deep admiration. He had compressed a vast amount of experience into his thirty years' acquaintance with the world and its wonders. He had been a traveller, and surveyed mankind, 'from China to Peru ;' he had seen all kinds of lovely women, of all nationalities ; but his private opinion was that he had never gazed upon a

sweeter creature than the girl who stood before him now.

He lifted his hat, and bowed profoundly. 'A thousand pardons for disturbing your slumbers. I came across the park by a private way known to me of old, but I had no idea I should meet with sleeping nymphs and dryads. I just paused to observe and to admire the picture—when, at that very moment, you woke. Another instant, and I should have stolen silently away. I cannot tell you how grieved I am.'

The tone was full of courteous regret, but his eyes had such a mischievous smile in them that Lenore smiled herself. Of course, she thought, it was only natural he should enjoy the situation immensely.

'It was so hot,' she murmured, casting down her eyes. Why is it that most people are so ashamed of being caught asleep? Then presently she lifted them again, her native daring and frankness coming back to her, and added, 'You are Mr Luttrell, are you not?'

‘I am that unworthy individual. And you, unless I greatly mistake, are Miss Lenore Chester.’

‘How did you know that? You can never have seen a likeness of me, for my cousins haven’t one.’

‘There is no magic in it,’ he answered, laughing. ‘I knew that you were to be here, and I recognise you by your likeness to Sir Herbert Dacre.’

Lenore started at this last sentence. ‘Am I really like my uncle?’ she asked in a tone that did not savour of pleasure.

‘You don’t look upon it as a compliment, I see. Well, that is hardly to be wondered at. Of course, you are a very handsome likeness of Sir Herbert, but you have unquestionably the Dacre cast of countenance.’

‘I don’t think I resemble him in anything else,’ said Lenore, with a meditative air.

‘Perhaps it is as well that you should not,’ observed Mr Luttrell drily. ‘Sir

Herbert is Sir Herbert, but I don't fancy that there is any need for his peculiarities to be reproduced in another and younger generation.'

Lenore laughed merrily at this. 'I see you know him,' she said, looking her new acquaintance full in the face for the first time. Why should she be so shy with him? She was at home with Sir Timothy from the first moment she saw him. But then Sir Timothy was only a big boy, after all, whereas Keith Luttrell was unmistakably a man.

'And now that we have introduced ourselves in this somewhat informal fashion, what is to follow?' asked Mr Luttrell presently. 'Would you like to go to sleep again, or shall I escort you back to the house, through the dangers and perils of this extensive park?'

'I think I will go back with you,' she answered, just a little shyly.

Mr Luttrell bowed, and they walked together for some time in solemn silence.



Presently it occurred to Lenore that now was a favourable opportunity for instituting a few judicious inquiries as to the relations between him and the expectant Selina.

‘You have known my cousins a long time, I think, Mr Luttrell?’ she began artfully.

‘Since I was a lad. I was connected with their father, Captain Partlet, you know ; a forty-fifth cousin twice removed, or something of that sort. Like the fellow in Maud, “I played with them when a child.”’

‘Selina is a very charming girl, don’t you think so?’

‘Ye-es, I suppose she is,’ answered Mr Luttrell, with the air of a man who had not previously considered the question. And this reply was almost enough for Lenore. If he were indeed a lover, he was quite as unenthusiastic a specimen of the species as Sir Timothy Jinks himself.

Mr Luttrell began to question in his turn. ‘Is anybody down here besides yourself?’

‘Sir Timothy Jinks. You know him, I suppose?’

‘Oh yes; a very decent sort of fellow, Jinks,’ said Mr Luttrell, in a patronising tone that would certainly have been resented by the baronet had he overheard it. ‘Has your uncle ever told you the story of his conversational powers?’

‘Oh yes, the evening after his arrival.’

‘I thought Sir Herbert wouldn’t wait long before he came out with it,’ said Luttrell, smiling. ‘He makes a point of telling it to every new-comer.’

‘Will he be able to tell us any story about you?’ asked Lenore with saucy demureness.

‘No, I think not. I have a knack of keeping the unfavourable portions of my history to myself.’

She felt that they were fast becoming good friends. By the time that they drew near the house, they were chatting as merrily and unrestrainedly as if their acquaintance had been one of years instead

of minutes. The two girls and Sir Timothy were strolling about on the lawn with their backs to them. And Lenore, suddenly remembering that the somewhat peculiar circumstances of her meeting with Luttrell would have to be narrated for their benefit, turned uncomfortably red.

Selina was the first to perceive them, and gave a start and a cry of surprise. Luttrell hastened forward, exchanged greetings, and made them all smile at his description of Lenore's horror at being discovered asleep. But Selina's smile—so, at least, it seemed to her cousin—was a very wintry one.

'A most romantic method of making each other's acquaintance,' she said, in a voice that sounded like a sneer.

'Most consummately and utterly poetical, to my thinking,' observed Mr Luttrell in his easy way.

'You always were a very extraordinary person,' again commented Miss Selina, with the frankness justified by long acquaint-

ance. 'What could have induced you to walk four miles in a broiling sun, when you could have driven straight from the station, I can't think.'

'A mysterious instinct must have whispered to me that I should meet with an adventure,' retorted Luttrell mischievously. Then, seeing that Lenore appeared somewhat embarrassed by this passage-at-arms between them, he added in a more serious tone, 'And really, you know, you English people, who hardly ever leave your own country, have no idea of heat. If you had been as much in the tropics as I have, you would call this a deliciously temperate day.'

Selina did not condescend to carry on the argument, but turned round and walked back to the house in a rather stately manner. Poor, foolish Selina, how very plainly she was showing her cards, thought Lenore to herself. Was it not probable that Mr Luttrell would care more for her if she did not show so clearly how much she cared for him?

The others followed in a straggling fashion, Lenore and Sir Timothy falling together a little behind the rest.

‘How do you like him?’ asked the baronet, in a low voice.

‘I have only known him a few minutes, but he seems very pleasant and gentlemanlike.’

‘Thinks a deuced deal of himself, I can tell you,’ said Sir Timothy, in a cautious undertone. We talk about women being jealous of each other, but the envy that a successful, handsome man excites amongst his own sex is hardly inferior to that which an acknowledged beauty excites amongst hers. ‘He has been spoiled by success, you know.’

‘What has he done that’s so very great?’

‘Oh, up at Oxford he was a tremendous swell. All the fellows used to swear by him, follow his lead in everything.’

‘I suppose he was very clever, then?’ aid innocent Lenore.

Sir Timothy laughed at her simplicity.

‘He wasn’t a swell in that way at all. Clever fellows—fellows who “grind,” as we call it—have no influence at the “’Varsity,” except in their own particular set. Luttrell’s fame was of quite a different kind. He was Stroke of the Eight, and easily first at everything in the athletic line.’

‘In short, a muscular Christian,’ laughed the girl, pleased to find that Mr Luttrell was not too learned.

‘And then the women have spoiled him,’ resumed Sir Timothy. ‘He is not rich, and I can’t see myself that his good looks are anything out of the way, but he has a kind of careless, don’t-care manner that seems to take with them. I suppose it’s precisely because he doesn’t appear to care that they make so much of him. You see how sulky Selina is because he saw you first ; well, of course, when a woman shows that sort of thing, it makes a man think a lot of himself.’

‘I hope you don’t think a great deal

of yourself, Sir Timothy?’ cried Lenore pertly. ‘You are a very agreeable young man as it is; I should be sorry to see you spoiled by affectation.’

The baronet shook his head solemnly.

‘No, Miss Chester, I’m not quite a fool. There’s nothing suggestive of the Apollo Belvedere about *my* personal appearance.’

At this point Gwendolen, who was walking on in front with Mrs Partlet and Luttrell, suddenly halted for the two laggards to catch them up. Of course Lenore quite understood this movement; Gwendolen thought it time that their *tête-à-tête* should be interrupted.

, Really the state of affairs was too embarrassing. Here was Selina actually showing temper because Luttrell had had the audacity to look at her while she was asleep, and Gwendolen watching Sir Timothy like a mouse. She felt inclined to cry out to the latter,—‘Take your fat-faced baronet; I wouldn’t have him if he were a millionaire.’

With Selina she was really angry—so angry that she half resolved to punish her by getting up a flirtation with Luttrell without loss of time. If Miss Partlet must be jealous, she might as well be jealous of something as nothing.

‘I have got into a hornet’s nest,’ she soliloquised when she was alone. ‘And anybody can see with half an eye that the young men don’t care a fig for them. I believe I shall be really pleased to see Bob; he, at least, will be my own property, unless Aunt Partlet takes a fancy to him. If she does, of course she’ll swear that he is dying to marry her. To fancy themselves beloved is evidently a mania in the Partlet family.’







## CHAPTER XI.

### A SURPRISE.



GWENDOLEN was by far the better-natured of the two girls—that Lenore had been able to discern at a glance. It was good-nature, probably, that led her the next day to carry to her cousin the intelligence that Mr Farquhar was expected at the Court that afternoon.

‘You don’t say so,’ cried Lenore in a theatrical tone, and pressing her hands hysterically upon her bosom. ‘Be still, my poor heart, and cease thy tumultuous beatings.’

For a moment Gwendolen only stared,

at this strange speech. She was well-meaning, but a little dull, and it required time for a joke to penetrate to her brain. When it began to dawn upon her, she smiled a little, then sighed.

‘What good spirits you have; I quite envy you them. But you would soon get them crushed if you had to pass your days here.’

‘Not a bit of it,’ cried Lenore cheerfully. ‘Forty thousand Uncle Herberts, with all their quantity of cantankerousness, couldn’t make me melancholy.’

Gwendolen seemed considering; presently she observed, with a blush that made her look quite pretty,—

‘Sir Timothy has wonderful spirits, hasn’t he?’

‘Wonderful, not to say mercurial,’ assented the other. ‘Do you know, Gwen,’ she added kindly, ‘you’ll just suit him. People with similar temperaments never get on well.’

‘Do you think so?’ asked Gwendolen,

with a kind of pleased bashfulness. As she stood there, looking the picture of sweet, maidenly confusion, Lenore found herself wondering if her virgin hopes with regard to the baronet would ever be crowned.

‘I say, Gwen,’ she said in a coaxing voice, ‘now I know your little secret, you ought not to hide anything from me. Has Sir Timothy come to the point yet?’

Gwendolen fell to picking to pieces the flower she carried in her hand. ‘N-o,’ she said at length, her cheek paling a little. ‘The fact is, I have not given him much opportunity lately. If a girl wants to make sure of a man in the future, she should hold back a bit at first, you know.’

‘It’s a dangerous game in these days,’ observed Lenore sagely, ‘when maidens are so many, and eligible men so few. A lame dog wants helping over the stile. Seriously, I think you would act

wisely in bringing Sir Timothy a little forward.'

'I will think over your advice,' said the young lady, with an assumption of carelessness. 'But really,' she added, with a sigh, 'when one thinks of the responsibilities and the uncertainties of married life, it makes one pause before committing one's self to the fatal step.'

'The arch little hypocrite!' thought Lenore to herself. 'She would pause a long time if he gave her a chance of saying yes.'

The conversation languished after this, so Gwendolen made a movement towards the door. 'Well, as I've told you the news, I'll be off. I thought you would like to know.'

A waggish impulse seized Lenore—an impulse which, for the life of her, she could not control. 'Gwen, dear, just tell me one thing before you go: are you quite sure that Robert Farquhar is indisputably my own property?'

Miss Partlet opened her eyes to their fullest extent at this singular question. 'Whose property should he be?'

'I didn't know whether you or Selina might have designs upon him for your *second*, or whether Aunt Partlet might have taken a fancy to him,' with a gravity so transparently assumed that even the dull Gwendolen was not taken in by it.

She drew herself up indignantly. 'Your jesting is very ill-timed, and I think mamma's age ought to have protected her from your ridicule. I am sorry we ever took you into our confidence, as it seems only to have furnished you with materials for insulting us.'

With stately step, and head high up in the air, she turned to leave the room, but Lenore caught hold of her arm.

'Oh, Gwen dear, don't be cross. I'm so awfully sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. I'm such a horrible mad-cap, you know. There are times when

I must have my joke, or die. You would rather let me have my joke now, wouldn't you?'

It was some time, however, before Gwendolen would allow herself to be propitiated by Lenore's humble entreaties for pardon. She didn't approve of jests upon such delicate subjects, she said. She could appreciate a joke as well as anybody—what a delusion, thought the other—but there was a point beyond which no person of refinement and good-feeling would go.

'You see, we are such a set of wild Arabs at home,' explained Lenore by way of final apology. 'We spend the best part of our time in cracking jokes upon each other. But I ought to be more careful in civilised society, I know.'

At last the little quarrel was made up, and Gwendolen was won over to sufficient friendliness to help Lenore in a little plot against Farquhar. They were not to let him know that she was

there, but to pretend that they were going to present him to a young lady of surpassing beauty. At first Gwen sniffed a suspicion of indecorum in the joke, but on being made acquainted with the fact that Bob and her cousin had known each other all their lives, was brought round to admit that the thing could be done. 'And capital fun it will be, if they don't spoil it,' thought Lenore to herself.

But Gwendolen did not spoil it. Having once satisfied herself of the propriety of the proceeding, there was enough of the girlish spirit of fun in her to carry it out well—so well indeed, that Mr Farquhar awaited with some impatience the advent of the lovely stranger whose charms had been so magnified to him by Gwen's eloquence. By the time that Lenore, bubbling over with suppressed laughter, went down to the drawing-room, he was prepared to greet her with his best bow, and put on his extra best society manners for her benefit.

Judge of his surprise, his consternation, his confusion, when, following immediately upon Gwendolen's thrilling whisper of, 'Here she is!' his old playmate entered the room, and crossed over to him with an easy,—

'How do you do, Robert? I hope I've not disappointed your expectations?'

The poor young man was a pitiable sight to behold, so extreme was his confusion. She was the last person in the world he had expected to meet at Dacre Court, knowing how little intimacy there was between the two houses, and never having heard of her uncle's recent invitation. His jaw dropped; his face was as red as a beetroot. All he could stammer was something like this,—

'No idea—knock me down with a feather! 'Pon my honour—last person in the world!'

When he regained his composure, Lenore was surprised to observe that he assumed a very dignified deportment.



Now, dignity had never been a failing of Robert's ; neither was it at all like him to resent a joke which, practised upon anybody else, would have secured his most cordial approval. She was so puzzled by his demeanour that she was determined to have it out with him on the first opportunity — which came a few minutes before dinner in the drawing-room, she having come down unusually early for her, and finding him already established.

‘ You're not cross about that little trick of mine, I hope, Bob ? ’ she asked anxiously.

‘ Oh dear, no ! ’ was the ready answer. But there was not the cordial old ring in his voice to which she had been accustomed. While she was cudgelling her brains as to the most diplomatic method of extorting a confession, he addressed her in his stiffest manner,—

‘ I hope, Miss Chester, you do not attribute my visit here to a desire to persecute

you with attentions which I know are so unwelcome. I hope you will believe me when I say that I had not the slightest idea you were in this house when I accepted Sir Herbert's invitation.'

The murder was out; she saw it all now. His pride was up in arms at the bare possibility of her thinking he had run after her. The dignity and stiffness were all explained. She would meet him in his own fashion.

'I do believe you, Mr Farquhar,' she answered in her stateliest manner. 'And I trust you will also believe me when I say that if I had known you were coming here, in time to put off my visit, I would have done so.'

She had hit him very hard — so hard that she saw him turn pale in spite of his assumption of bravado. That touched her at once, and brought the farce to an end. She burst into a merry peal of laughter, and held out her hand to him.

'Bob, you old stupid, why this "thus-

ness"? Why this vast and awful politeness—this ceremonious prefix of Mr and Miss? We who were a couple of little ragamuffins together! Shake hands, Bob, and let us be friends at once. I'm awfully glad to see you. It's like old times, before you made a goose of yourself about—I won't say what.'

Thus abjured, Mr Farquhar came down from his pedestal, and gave the proffered hand a more than brotherly shake.

'Pray, forgive me, Lenore,' he said in a contrite tone. 'I feel I made an ass of myself just now.'

'Wisdom was never your strong point, Robert,' she cried merrily. 'Any way, we're friends now, and we're not going to make any more dignified speeches to each other.'

So peace was restored between them; but there was still one point on which Mr Farquhar required to be reassured.

'Lenore, you didn't quite mean what you said just now—that about putting off

your visit if you had known I was coming?’

‘Bob,’ she answered seriously, ‘I have told you that I look upon you as a brother, and I mean it. If you were going away to the Cape, or India, or anywhere, I would travel from one end of England to the other to bid you good-bye.’

Comforting and soothing words these ; but they seemed to have an effect the reverse of cheerful upon the usually genial lieutenant, for he heaved a profound sigh.

‘It’s a very good thing to be brother to a charming girl,’ he said in a mournful voice ; ‘but if you could only just get a step farther—just cross the line that divides the brother from the lover. Because, you know, Lenore,’ he added more briskly, ‘where a fellow is not *really* your brother, the dividing space can’t be great. To care for a fellow at all, in any fashion, is a long step towards caring for him in the way he wants.’

She lifted up a warning finger.

‘Bob, a truce to this conversation ; it is idle and profitless. Your reading has not been extensive, I know, but perhaps you may remember the lines of the poet,—

“The little more, and how much it is ;  
The little less, and what worlds away !”

Let us discuss other subjects. Were you not surprised to receive Sir Herbert’s invitation ?’

‘Somewhat. I have only been here twice before in my life ; once with my mother, and again with the governor and my sisters. By the way, what men are here ?’

‘Sir Timothy Jinks and Mr Luttrell.’

‘Jinks I know, a fat-faced, good-natured beggar. But what particular Luttrell is it ? There are a lot of the name. There is a Luttrell who was stroke-oar in the Oxford Eight.’

“That *is* the Luttrell who is here,” said Lenore.

‘Um,’ said Mr Farquhar, in a tone that did not imply approval of the gentleman in question. ‘I don’t know him personally—he was before my time; but I’ve heard a good deal about him. One of your “beauty” men, a dangler about drawing-rooms, and a pet of the women, with a vastly good opinion of himself; that’s the character Mr Keith Luttrell bears amongst those who are not his particular admirers.’

‘I suppose the women would be sure to spoil him; handsome men generally do get spoiled, don’t you think so?’ inquired Lenore, with an indifferent air. At the present time Mr Luttrell’s reputation and pursuits were matters of perfect indifference to her.

‘I can’t say,’ said Farquhar candidly. ‘All I know with any certainty is that women have never conspired to spoil *me*.’

‘Why, Bob, you conceited creature, you don’t mean to say that you consider yourself handsome?’

‘Not strictly handsome, perhaps,’ answered the young gentleman, with a gravity that might have imposed upon one less used to him than Lenore; ‘but when you grow accustomed to it, there is a something pleasing about my countenance—a *Je ne sais quoi*—which is too often lacking in the beauty that consists of mere regularity of feature.’

Their *tête-à-tête* was interrupted by the entrance of other members of the party, but not before Lenore had time to whisper to him,—‘I *am* glad you’ve come, Bob. Now it’s understood that there’s to be no nonsense between us—you know what I mean. It is simply *awful* to be shut up in a house full of people, without a familiar friend to whom you can impart your opinions about them from time to time.’

Farquhar’s general jollity and good-nature created a favourable impression upon all—with, perhaps, the exception of Luttrell, who did not seem to quite relish the familiarity between him and Lenore.

‘Mr Farquhar appears to be a very intimate friend of yours,’ he observed to her in the course of the evening.

‘Oh dear, yes!’ she answered innocently. ‘We’ve known each other since we were babies. I look upon him as a brother.’

‘Dear me, how nice! It seems quite like a family party. I wish I could come across some charming young ladies who would let me go in for the brotherly business.’

‘I thought there was something of the “brotherly business,” as you call it, between you and cousin Selina,’ said Lenore mischievously. And Mr Luttrell did not reply to this shaft.

He was not, however, the only person present who evinced curiosity as to her relations with Robert. Later on, in the evening, Sir Herbert got her into a snug corner by himself and proceeded to tackle her upon the same subject.

‘A very decent young fellow,’ he condescended to observe. ‘I should be glad



if his hair were of a different hue, for I am very sensitive to colours; but I see he has the sense to keep it closely cropped, which shows consideration for the feelings of his friends. The girls have given me to understand that there are tender relations between you. Is that the case?’

‘Certainly not,’ was the prompt reply. ‘We are very great friends, but that is all.’

‘Is it his hair that’s the objection, may I ask?’

‘No; it’s himself,’ answered Lenore, laughing.

‘Because I was going to remark that, if that were the case, I don’t suppose he would have any objection to dye it to any shade you approved. It might be put in the settlements. But seriously, my dear, I fancy you might do worse. He seems to me, an honest, well-disposed young man.’

‘But I have told you I don’t care for him, uncle.’

‘I can’t see that that has much to do

with the matter,' argued Sir Herbert seriously. 'If you were to marry a man you loved, in two years' time—*or less*—you would cease to care for him; so that you would arrive at precisely the same stage which you have reached now with regard to this young man.'

'But, even supposing your cynical prophecies should come true, uncle, I should have had the pleasure of being in love. Why should I forego that advantage? But I am very glad to hear you speak so well of Bob,' she added heartily, 'for I am sure he is one of the best fellows in the world.'

'I know what a good reader of character you are, uncle,' she resumed presently, in a coaxing voice. 'Now, do tell me, privately and confidentially, you know, what is your opinion of Sir Timothy? I should so like to hear.'

'Tis a good Timothy,' said Sir Herbert, with that peculiar twinkle in his eye which always came into it when he was

engaged in the congenial task of dissecting his fellow-mortals ; ‘ but shallow, very shallow—not the stuff out of which either a good foe or a staunch friend is made.’

‘ And what of Mr Luttrell ? ’ she questioned again.

The old man’s eyebrows contracted, as if he were puzzled, and he did not answer with his usual readiness. ‘ Not so easy to read, my dear, as guileless Jinks, and your fiery-headed friend ; but I should not be disposed to take much stock, as the Yankees say, in Master Keith Luttrell. If I were a woman, I should trust him just as far as I could see him, and no further.’

Lenore smiled. This cantankerous old creature liked both Jinks and Farquhar because he could break his rude jests upon them, and they were good-natured enough not to hit him back. But he disliked Luttrell, because he knew that he could hold his own in repartee. Such was her reading of his judgments.

‘ I would advise you to take care of

yourself amongst all these young men, my dear,' he said to her presently.

She gave her head a pretty disdainful toss. 'Don't you think I look like a young woman who is able to take care of herself, Uncle Herbert?'

The old cynic gazed upon her animated loveliness with softened eyes. 'I think I ought to have said that it is *they* who will have to take care of themselves with you amongst them.'

At that moment Selina bore down upon them, smiling graciously, and with an evident desire to make herself agreeable. She had also noticed the friendly relations which seemed to subsist between her cousin and Farquhar, and had come to the conclusion that, in spite of Lenore's protestations to the contrary, there *was* something between them. She was prepared therefore, in consequence of this belief, to forgive her her romantic meeting with Luttrell, and take her to her bosom again.

‘You do look cosy,’ she said, in her pleasantest voice, and preparing to deposit herself upon a vacant chair in their vicinity, when Sir Herbert’s bland tones arrested her intention.

‘Ah, Selina, my child, you are looking brilliant to-night. I am just carrying on a most interesting conversation with your cousin. But I can’t get on without my snuff-box ; the thread of my ideas gets snapped without it. If it is not troubling you too much, would you mind having a look round the room for it? Ask Farquhar if he has put it in his pocket by mistake.’

Without a word Selina turned and walked majestically away, the crimson hue of mortification on her cheeks at this summary intimation that her presence could be dispensed with. Lenore turned on the venerable Sir Herbert a look of the keenest reproach.

‘Oh, uncle ! how *could* you ?’ she cried indignantly.

But Sir Herbert's only answer was a chuckle—a chuckle so deep, so prolonged, so rich, so full of malignant enjoyment, that his horrified niece was forced to the conclusion that this uncanny old man must be at times possessed with an evil spirit.

When Lenore found leisure to reflect over the events of the day, she could not but feel that her cousins had made a crowning mistake in inviting Farquhar. A third gentleman had been imperatively needed to restore the balance of parties, but she most devoutly wished that they had fixed upon anybody else but her old playmate. For one glance at him had been enough to convince her that he was no farther on the road to recovery than on the day when she bade him good-bye at the cliff wall. His voice when it addressed her, his eyes when they rested on her, proclaimed him as lovelorn as ever. And she felt genuinely sorry that his hopeless passion should be fed by the fuel of her presence.

‘He’s awfully fond of shooting,’ she said to herself with a little pitying sigh. ‘Perhaps it will take away his thoughts from me.’

But the sequel dispelled this fond hope. Although his bag was always the biggest, and he had never been in better form than in this particular season, he could not cease to worship his divinity. She was more to him than myriads of slaughtered birds.





## CHAPTER XII.

### CROSS-PURPOSES.

**T**HINKS, old man, give us a comic song?' cried Mr Luttrell, with that easy air of command which many of his acquaintance, and notably the juniors of his own sex, found so irritating. He did not mean anything by it; the tone had been caught naturally by one who had been captain of his school, and a shining light at his college; but then you cannot make other people believe this.

They had rowed up the river which skirted a portion of Sir Herbert's grounds, and disembarked at a shady spot designed for picnics. Their host had not accom-



panied them, his age and infirmities prohibiting him from taking part in such amusements. I need hardly say that nobody regretted his absence. The feast was over. They had eaten and drunken, and were beginning to feel just a trifle drowsy. Hence Luttrell's amiable desire for a diversion of some kind.

Sir Timothy drew himself up stiffly, and looked as dignified as nature would allow him—for a fat, good-natured face, and sandy-coloured hair parted down the middle, do not lend themselves readily to a severe deportment.

'I am not your jester-in-ordinary, Mr Luttrell,' he replied in an icy voice.

Robert Farquhar, who was seated close to Lenore, found such wondrous wit in this retort that he became almost convulsed with mirth. 'Capital, Jinks—capital!' he cried out enthusiastically. 'Never heard anything better in my life.'

Sir Timothy, tickled by the compli-

ment, condescended to look a trifle less dignified. As for Luttrell, he shrugged his shoulders with provoking good-humour.

‘You two fellows seem to understand each other thoroughly,’ he observed quietly. ‘Really, Farquhar, I quite envy you your capacity for discovering hidden wit. I wish I had it; it must be as good as a sixth sense.’

‘I think it would be as well if you took the trouble to amuse us yourself,’ said Selina, in her coldest and most cutting tones. ‘Sir Timothy and Mr Farquhar are kindness itself, but it is certainly not fair that they should have the whole burden of entertainment thrust upon them.’ And she bestowed a beaming smile upon the two gentlemen in turn, that ought to have flattered them immensely.

‘Don’t look at me in that tone of voice, Selina, or you will drive me to despair,’ pleaded Luttrell, assuming a

melancholy air. 'I would amuse you if I could, but my powers are so limited. I have told you all my stories, and to sing I am ashamed. Suppose we have some riddles; there is an innocence combined with an intellectual activity about riddles that are characteristic of no other form of diversion. Let me begin with you, Miss Chester—When is a door not a door? I'm certain you haven't heard it before.'

'I once gave you credit for some sense, Keith,' cried Selina angrily. To do her justice, she and Farquhar were the only two who kept their countenances.

'You were ever of a gentle and confiding nature,' murmured the incorrigible young man softly. 'Well, if Jinks won't sing, and Farquhar won't talk, and I'm not to be allowed to ask riddles, what *shall* we do?'

Lenore thought it time to come to the rescue. The relations of what should be

a merry party seemed approaching a state of tension, and she knew full well that she was the cause.

‘Please sing us a comic song, Sir Timothy?’ she pleaded in her most persuasive tones, and flashing at him a glance that would have upset the dignity of an archbishop.

The baronet was but mortal. That glance made him tingle all over, and he flushed to the roots of his hair. To earn one such other look, he would have sung himself hoarse. Poor Gwendolen, who was watching him intently, could not but admit that the artillery of *her* eyes had never knocked him out of time as that one flash of Lenore’s radiant orbs had done.

‘To oblige *you* and the other ladies, Miss Chester,’ he explained, with an emphasis on the ‘you’ that made Gwendolen’s eyes emit angry sparkles. And forthwith he launched into a humorous ditty that extorted smiles from all, and

restored them to, at least, the semblance of good-humour.

It was a fortnight ago since Lenore made her appearance at Dacre Court. Her reception, on the whole, she had declared to be satisfactory. Her cousins had welcomed her, if not with open arms, at least with as good a grace as could be expected under the circumstances. And Gwendolen, the kinder-hearted and better-natured of the two, had subsequently declared that she would not begrudge her a fair share of Sir Herbert's money. Then had come the day when the two girls had taken her into their confidence with regard to each other's lovers, and had besought her to efface herself for their benefit. Her exemplary conduct on that occasion had won her golden opinions from both; they were going in a fair way to become actually fond of her.

But alas! the arrival of the young men speedily changed these affectionate sentiments. She had promised Selina, on

Gwendolen's behalf, that she would not encourage Sir Timothy. And she kept her word, duty in this case going hand-in-hand with inclination. She had promised Gwendolen, in Selina's interests, that she would keep Luttrell at a distance. She kept her word here too, though in this case inclination was opposed to duty, and led the latter a hard time of it. Still, she wished to act honestly by her cousins, and she strove her best to do so. It was only fair that she should have a slice of the old man's money—though, if it hadn't been for their misfortunes at home, she would never have taken the trouble to think about such a thing. But she had no desire to take away the girls' lovers, in addition to reducing their expectations.

So she had done her best to keep both Luttrell and the baronet at a distance. Unfortunately, the more she attempted to keep them at bay, the more ardently did they advance. If it was true—what the

girls had stated—that there was a tacit understanding between themselves and the two gentlemen, the latter seemed to totally ignore the existence of such a tender compact. They made no secret of their preference for Lenore. Their attentions were paid in the most open manner.

It was certainly hard lines for Selina and Gwendolen. They were in the position of the wall-flowers at a ball, who have to sit still and pretend to be enjoying it all immensely, while their hearts are burning with rage and mortification. Other girls are whirled about the room in dance after dance, and are inundated with partners. *They*, the hapless ones, remain where they are with empty programmes, and painfully conscious of the fact that they might much better have stayed at home.

This was the position of these unfortunate maidens, and it was a hard one. Here were three young men, invited at

their instigation, who, instead of dividing their attentions equally amongst the three young ladies, had all fallen in love with one girl—and that girl an interloper. You could not expect them to take such a state of things calmly. Only, as a matter of course, instead of venting their indignation upon the men, it was the girl whom they visited with their wrath.

Poor Lenore paid very dearly for her power to attract. The girls hardly spoke a civil word to her, and Mrs Partlet, who was quite ready to believe her a designing minx, was very little less rude than her daughters. If she had consulted her own choice in the matter, Lenore would have left Dacre Court without a moment's loss of time. But Sir Herbert had taken a decided fancy to her; and for the sake of her family, it was only right that she should do all in her power to strengthen that feeling. It is almost needless to say that that astute old gentleman had fathomed the state of affairs, and extracted



huge delight therefrom. A house full of jealous girls—what could be more amusing to a person of his peculiar temperament?

So much for the feminine element. As for the men, they hated each other. Or, to speak more correctly, Sir Timothy and Farquhar united in hatred of Luttrell, because they felt that he was easily first in the race. As for Luttrell, he regarded his rivals with a kind of good-humoured contempt. They were only boys, in spite of the airs they gave themselves, and were altogether too absurdly presumptuous in daring to aspire seriously to the love of so splendid a creature as Lenore. If Farquhar had been the favoured one, it is possible that Mr Luttrell would have come down from his lofty pinnacle of calm disdain, and united with Sir Timothy in fervent hatred of the fortunate lieutenant.

And having given the reader this insight into the present condition of things at Dacre Court, I will take

up my story from the point where I quitted it.

It was with a certain sense of relief that they all prepared for their return home. The party had not been a success—how could it be when pretty nearly everybody felt vicious with somebody else? The servants removed the *débris* of the lunch, and went back by road. The ladies and gentlemen strolled down to the river where their boat was moored.

‘I suppose you’ll row back, Jinks, as Farquhar rowed here? You can pull, I suppose?’ said Luttrell.

He put the question in all innocence, being perfectly ignorant of the other’s aquatic powers. But in his present mood towards the man, Sir Timothy felt highly incensed by such a query, and believed it to be prompted by Luttrell’s usual desire to show off and make himself offensive.

‘I believe I can row tolerably well,

although I wasn't stroke-oar of the "Varsity" Eight,' he said in a dogged tone.

For a moment Luttrell's brows contracted ominously, then he smiled good-temperedly. Why should he treat this rude speech seriously? The fellow was only a boy of a larger growth, and mad with jealousy. He could afford to be generous, as he was so sure of victory.

'Jinks, my dear boy,' he said easily, 'I begin to have a faint suspicion that you're "a-chaffin' of me."'

The baronet condescended to no reply, but took up his oar sulkily and prepared to row. He only muttered something to himself in an inaudible voice about 'punching a fellow's head.' But as Luttrell did not catch this, his serenity remained undisturbed.

It was a silent voyage for the most part. The river wound along through flowery meads and sylvan woods that might well have moved them to admiring

speech. But their hearts were full of angry thoughts, and they heeded not the message of peace that nature whispered to them. The sun shone, the birds carolled, the trees waved, and the silver waters sang them a song of youth and love ; but they were filled with wrath and spite against each other, and these things touched them not.

To their surprise, Sir Herbert was awaiting them at their landing-place, having hobbled down as far with the aid of a thick stick. It did not take that intelligent reader of the human countenance long to see that things had not worked very smoothly. As their host, this fact ought to have grieved him, but I don't think it did.

'Hope you've enjoyed yourselves,' he said in his shrill, piping tones. 'Not that you look a particularly lively lot. You rather remind me of that "party in the parlour, all silent, and all—" I won't finish, out of consideration to the ladies.'

‘ I think picnics are a mistake,’ observed Selina, who was the first to alight, ‘ unless there is a very large party.’

‘ Most amusements *are* a mistake, my dear,’ explained her uncle, with his usual cheerful way of regarding life. ‘ There’s too much human nature in men and women to allow them to be a complete success. The human nature will come out, and when it does, it’s a very nasty thing,’ concluded this wise old cynic, shaking his venerable head.

‘ Pity you didn’t come with us, sir,’ said Jinks, for want of something better to say.

‘ Ah, Jinks, my boy,’ cried the old gentleman, feigning great cordiality, ‘ you’ve been pulling, I see. Caught any crabs?’

‘ No, nor lobsters either,’ returned Sir Timothy shortly; for he saw a smile upon Luttrell’s face.

Sir Herbert addressed kind inquiries to every member of the party in turn, but even his acid remarks failed to restore their spirits. They returned to the house in

a limp fashion. The girls retired to their rooms. Luttrell shut himself up in the library to write letters. Farquhar and Sir Timothy strolled together arm-in-arm on the terrace, united by the sense of common misfortune and detestation of another. Sir Herbert went back to his easy-chair, and chuckled to himself fiercely over the recollections of his youth.

‘Jealousy, jealousy! cruel as the grave,’ ruminated this singular old gentleman. ‘They could kill each other, torture each other, put something of a deleterious nature in each other’s coffee cups. I’ve been through it; I know what it’s like. Haven’t I lain awake at nights, planning impossible schemes of vengeance, fancying I had got my white-faced rival—curse him even at this distance of time!—in my power? Bah! What’s the use of ripping up these old sores? It isn’t Christian.’

While Sir Herbert was thus meditating over the past, Selina and Gwendolen were closeted together, engaged in the

cheerful occupation of denouncing their cousin.

‘I hate her—she makes me feel wicked,’ cried Selina viciously, tearing her hat off, and throwing it violently on the floor. There ~~was~~ unquestionably some very wild blood in the Dacre veins. ‘I have been grossly deceived in her; I believed her to be upright and honourable. She is unscrupulous, designing, heartless. She has utterly bewitched Keith. What *can* he see in her big, baby eyes?’ This is the old question that has ever perplexed woman,—what can the man she loves see in her rival, to forsake her?

‘Yours is the harder case of the two, because she likes him as well as he likes her,’ said Gwendolen tearfully. She was of a softer mould than her sister, having less of the wild Dacre blood. ‘But she has quite stolen away my poor Timothy. And you know how fond he used to be of me. She has cast her horrid spells over him. Oh, Selina, Selina! what fools we

were to have them down while she was here. We ought to have guessed such beauty as hers would work mischief.'

'Beauty indeed!' cried her sister scornfully. 'She is all made up—she paints, I'm sure; that bloom of hers is not natural.'

'I believe it is, really; it always keeps the same,' said Gwendolen, who was just in her wrath. 'If it was paint, she would put it on a bit thicker or thinner at times.'

While the two sisters were thus dissecting the hapless Lenore, Sir Timothy and Farquhar were performing the same surgical operation upon Luttrell; their own rivalry, which would have blazed out and converted them into deadliest foes had there been no other rival in the field, being hushed for the moment in the presence of the successful enemy.

'A fellow of that kind acts as a complete wet blanket upon what should be a convivial and harmonious party,' observed



the irate lieutenant, in his grandest manner.

‘I perfectly agree with you,’ assented Sir Timothy gloomily. ‘Such men ought not to be admitted into general society—or amongst women.’

‘A devilish good thrashing would do such a fellow good, and take the cheek out of him,’ pursued the other, drawing himself up with a very determined air.

‘I perfectly agree with you on that point also,’ assented the baronet civilly. ‘But as a matter of fact, there are very few men about who *could* thrash Luttrell. I’ve seen him at Angelo’s knock one boxer after another into a cocked hat.’

‘I shouldn’t mind having a try,’ protested the lieutenant valiantly. ‘I’m rather handy with my fists.’

Sir Timothy could not refrain from smiling. There was a schoolboy air about Mr Farquhar’s remedies which aroused his sense of the humorous.

‘Still, you can’t punch a man’s head

solely for offering attentions to a young lady who seems very well disposed to receive them,' he ventured to observe. Hitherto they had discreetly avoided any allusion to the cause of their hatred against their common enemy, out of delicacy to the object of their united affections. But this kind of reticence cannot be maintained for ever.

'I suppose one can't,' rejoined Mr Farquhar, in a reluctant voice, adding presently, with tremendous energy,—'I tell you what it is, Jinks, it was a bad day for England when duelling went out of fashion. In the old days, when a fellow made himself offensive to another fellow, a snug little meeting in the park, before the world had opened its eyes, soon settled the matter.'

Perhaps the baronet did not quite relish the other's 'bounce,' for the reason that it tended to make him appear the better and braver man of the two. At any rate, he answered him very drily.

'Even there I think Luttrell would

have scored. He's a dead shot with a pistol, you know.'

'Hang him!' groaned Mr Farquhar heartily. 'He seems to score in everything.'

'He does,' corroborated Sir Timothy. 'He is one of those provoking beasts who are born to excel. I hate such fellows; they ought to be transported to some distant island, where they could pass their time in mutually admiring each other.'

END OF VOL. I.





